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OR, JIM REARDON'S BIG TROUBLE.

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AUTHOR OF "OLD WEASEL-TOP," "SANDY
ANDY," "LARIAT LIL," "LITTLE SHOO-
FLY," "BOWIE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

LITTLE SHOO-FLY.

"Oh, Clem! Whab's dat boy, Clem? 'Fo' de
Lawd, I 'low dat tryin' young nig done broke
ebery bone in my ole body one o' dese days, hol-
ler'n' after him! You, Clem!"

Out of the ranch kitchen waddled Mammy,
like an animated feather-bed in a very bad tem-
per.

Planting her pudgy hands on her fat hips,
with her black arms akimbo, to steady herself

"LOOK OUT DAB!" SHOUTED CLEM. "I'LL DRAP YE, SHORE!"

while she puffed and blew with shortness of breath, and mumbled and muttered with wrath, she glanced up at the sky, a blazing sun in a blue field to westward, but black and lowering with an on-rushing tempest toward the east; then at a clothes-line full of fluttering linen, which she had recently washed to a snowy whiteness; finally in either direction along the side of the house, in impatient quest of the missing Clem.

In vain did the sentinel cottonwoods that towered spire-like around the ranch-house, rustle their leaves till they flashed like silver bangles on the forehead of a queen of the harem, or on the wrist of a Saxon coquette. In vain lay the landscape smiling in the sun, the rolling prairie, with its grazing cattle, the wooded uplands, the serrated mountain-tops, the long, low line of timber that marked a water-course skirting the horizon.

Mammy was bent on business, and had no time to indulge her taste for the beautiful just then.

"I know whar I'll rout out dat 'corrigible young lazy-bones!" she declared, wagging her turbaned head with malicious satisfaction.

And seizing a broom that stood at hand, she proceeded, with the unctuous roll of a "ship's doctor," round the corner of the house.

Sure enough, just where the sun beat hottest against the western wall, she found a little darky, at once her trial and her pride, curled up asleep on a sloping cellar-door.

"Shoo!" she cried, hitting him a "swipe" with the broom.

Probably not from the force and precision of the blow, but rather because he was so used to this sort of rousing as instinctively to get out of the way of a repetition even before he was fairly awake, the boy rolled off the cellar-door, sputtering as he scrambled to his feet:

"Wha'che—wha'che—what ye do'n wid me?"

"Git out o' hyah, you lazy vagabones!" cried Mammy, following him up with a menacing flourish of her besom, though she knew from long experience that there was no chance of her "getting in her work on him" again on that occasion.

"I ain't do'n nuffin!" pleaded Little Shoo-fly, in an aggrieved tone, tenderly rubbing a very much worn spot in his trousers, while he looked at the broom as if it were his mortal enemy.

"What's de reason you ain' do'n sumfin', den?" demanded Mammy. "Don't you see dat rain-stawm comin', an' dat ah line jis' loaded down wid clo's, a-waitin' fur nuffin' at all only to git wet? What fur you t'ink yo' ole mammy sweat an' rack her bones fur to wash out dat b'ilin', while you lay snoozin' hyar in the sun like a 'coon in a holler logg? Git along, dah, an' take in dem clo's a-runnin'!"

Moving off with a side-shuffle that kept his face to the foe—a forced march, judging from its slowness, rather than from its speed—Clem glanced up at the threatening heavens.

The storm-cloud, a black line of wrath with a ragged gray fringe in the van, like the grizzly beetling brows of a frowning Old Man of the Mountain, hung motionless in the sky, as if held at bay by the wind that was yet blowing briskly toward it. But it was only gathering rage for a final burst of fury, when it would sweep everything in its path.

"Whah's Missy Lina?" asked Little Shoo-fly, with a sudden bright idea that promised to release him from his irksome task.

"Don't you mine 'bout Missy Lina," answered Mammy. "You gib yo' hull 'tention to dem ah clo's. Dat's 'nough fur lazy niggah-boy like you-all."

"She done gwine to de sto', to git a 'tic'lar ribbon what she wan' ole Mom Guffins fur to git her f'om de States. I reckon she done git her deff o' wettin', 'fo' she—"

"Look a-hyah, boy!—you's altogether too knowin'! Maybe you git it frough yo' tick pate, ef I fotch ye a lick wid dish-yah broom, dat Missy Lina done got Mars' Jim fur to look atter her, an' don' want no 's'niffan' 'trash hangin' 'roun' her petticoat-tail, nobow! You take dat ah bahsket, an' fall to, like I tole ye."

Clem gazed at the basket ruefully, as if wondering that fate should give so cruel a burden to so reluctant a back, but finally, with a profound sigh of resignation, began to drag it toward the clothes-line, as if every step in the direction of work were a blight upon his life.

"Hi, dah, boy! You pull foot livelier'n dat! Don't you let dat stawm kotch you, or I'll lam you twell you' wawm!"

And with this parting admonition Mammy waddled back into the kitchen, mumbling menaces, and wondering why "de Lawd done visit her wid sich a soul-tryin' 'fiction."

Clem gazed at the line from end to end, and probably concluding that the best way was to "take the bull by the horns," summoned all his energies to the task, and got a sheet down into the basket.

There he rested on his labors, sighing as if he had been carrying a pig of lead up a steep hill in the heat of the day.

Apparently fearing that such Herculean efforts, if persisted in, would be the death of him, his next essay was, on a very long-legged stocking, which he found some distance down the line.

Then he sat down on the edge of the basket to rest, gazing with treasonable speculation, now at the threatening sky, and now at the kitchen door.

"Spec' Missy Lina orter hab somefin' to put aroun' her," he reflected. "Mars' Jim he's powerful 'tic'lar 'bout her. Dat's all along o' her bein' teeny-weeny an' delicate."

Then, with a deeply aggrieved sigh:

"I don't like dish-yah clo's-gittin'-in, nobow!"

The shrill whinny of a horse drew his eye afield, where he saw one playful animal flirt his heels at a fellow, and prance off with head up and tail in the air.

That settled the question in Clem's wavering conscience.

Instantly he leaped up from the basket, with the activity and alertness of a panther, his eyes shining, his ivory gleaming.

Looking at him now, no one would have dreamed that he had ever had a tired muscle in his body.

From the kitchen, blending with the clatter of dishes and pans, came Mammy's voice, maundering a hymn, the refrain of which was something about "when de Bridegroom comes."

In a twinkling Clem was scuttling toward the house, from which he presently reappeared, the bearer of a waterproof cloak.

To catch a horse and mount him, with only a rope halter, was but child's-play to an expert like Little Shoo-fly; and when Mammy came to the door, under the impression that the first installment of clothes had been about long enough delayed, she was just in time to see her undutiful son and heir scampering away at a spanking gallop.

Too much enraged at the trick he had played her to call after him, she could only, with a despondent shake of the head, lift her hands in mute appeal to Heaven, to save "sich a limb o' Satan f'om de 'struction what he's rushin' onter in de debil's railroad kyabs!"

Clem looked back at her, and holding the cloak above his head so that it fluttered in the wind as he rode, shouted with a laugh:

"G'way, shoo-fly!"

There was one thing in the make-up of this little monkey that attracted the eye with surprise. He had strapped about his waist as murderous-looking a "six-shooter" as ever graced the hip of any cowboy of them all.

CHAPTER II.

SUNSHINE AND SHADOW.

OUT where the rolling prairie swelled and broke into hills that here and there mimicked the ragged mountain-side, a columnar pine, broken by the wind, had fallen into the arms of a more fortunate comrade.

Scampering up its slanting trunk, startled by the sound of approaching hoofs, a bead-eyed cony paused midway, arrested by a ripple of sweet laughter, which died away in a low, crooning murmur of protest, that he would have been a poor lover who did not interpret *do* where it said *don't*!

The dainty little miss, whose exquisite charm of face and figure, and low voice, and graceful movements, and bewitching coquetry of dress, were marks of gentle breeding, was Lina Merrill.

The sturdy young ranchero, with deeply bronzed face, yet white forehead, and clear, bold eye, was Jim Reardon—a man of a million, as his admiring friends all insisted.

He had taken advantage of the solitude of the trail to rein his horse close beside that of his companion, with such eagerness that she was fain to cry him mercy, as blushing maidens will.

"Oh, Jim! you mustn't—indeed, indeed, you mustn't!"

"Why not?" he asked, pausing only for the delight of cutting short her objection midway.

"Not so much!" was the merciful qualification of her interdict. "Can't you let me be for a minute at a time?"

"Lina, are you always going to stand me off like this?" he asked, a shade of wistfulness flitting across his face.

"If I don't succeed better than now," she

laughed, with a merry twinkle in her eyes, "you will have little cause for complaint, I fancy!"

Then, with a wave of tender remorse that she had even suggested the thought that she could seriously repel his caresses, she suddenly yielded herself to him, as freely as he had sought her.

In that moment he caught a glimpse of what startled him with the thought that, beneath all the gay coyness of his little lady-love, there might dwell a depth and intensity of passionate feeling that he had not suspected.

Almost abruptly he released her, and rode quietly at her side, his face grown quite grave.

The girl did not seem disturbed by this change in his mood. Her gay, half-bantering humor returned; though, instead of saying anything further, she began to peer about for hidden beauties in the varying panorama which nature spread out around her.

So it happened that she discovered the cony, as she was passing, and laughed and clapped her hands so delightedly that he whisked around to the under side of the trunk, and ran further up out of reach, but stopped near the top to peer through a crotch at her, wrinkling his nose and flirting his tail nervously.

"Lina," said her companion, "do you know?—I am sometimes almost afraid that something will happen so that I shall lose you, even before you are fairly mine."

She looked around quickly, and with a gentle reassurance reached out and put her hand on his arm, while she gazed wonderingly up into his face.

"Why, what an idea!" she exclaimed. "What could possibly happen?"

"I don't know, unless some wily magician, with new lamps to trade for old ones, should suddenly whisk you off through the air to the heart of Africa!"

"Would you go to as much trouble to get me back, as Aladdin did to recover the princess?" she queried, archly.

He looked into her eyes, but made no verbal reply. Silence is often more eloquent than words.

"Clem would come for me, if you didn't!" she went on, ending with a ripple of amused laughter. "Isn't it funny that he takes to me so?"

"He is only yielding to what his betters have found irresistible."

But she held up a rosy-tipped finger, with an admonitory:

"Sh!"

Never had these two been more assured in their happiness, than when an unexpected growl of thunder awoke them from their absorption in each other.

"We're in for a thunder-shower!" cried Jim, feeling the chill of the shifting wind, though he could not see the darkening sky through the foliage overhead.

A few minutes later they emerged from the wooded vale, upon the open prairie, and then the scence burst upon them.

"We'll never get home!" ejaculated Lina, anxiously.

She was thinking that a thorough wetting would add nothing to the attractiveness of certain little articles of personal adornment which she had secured, to make herself as bewitching as possible on a ceremonious occasion not far in the future.

"We'll have to ride for it," declared Jim, giving his horse the spur.

They rode like the wind; but that did not prevent Lina's eyes from ranging around in quest of some place of retreat from the storm which she felt certain would burst upon them long before they could reach home.

"Isn't that a ranch over there?" she asked, pointing away to a clump of frondage on the western horizon.

"Yes," answered Jim, without looking round.

"Is it Sat Godwin's?"

"Yes," with an abruptness that did not yet attract Lina's notice.

"What is the reason you didn't tell me I had a neighbor so near, in his daughter, Gay?"

There was a momentary pause, in which Jim frowned and bit his lip; and then recovering himself, he answered:

"You wouldn't care to be intimate with the Godwins."

"Why not?" she persisted, still innocently unconscious.

"Well, Godwin does well enough for out here. People ain't over particular. But you aren't used to such associations in your own home, and I don't want you to be in mine, any more than can be helped."

"Does he drink?"

Jim smiled.

"That wouldn't make him singular."
 "I suppose," suggested Lina, at a venture, "they're very poor."
 "Poor? Oh, no! All sorts of people get on, out here."

But at this point Lina's investigations were cut short, without her yet perceiving that there was anything evasive in the answers she had got.

"Look! look!" she cried, suddenly pulling her horse up.

The spectacle was enough to daunt almost any one.

Of a sudden, like hounds breaking from the leash, the clouds began to mount the sky, and speed across the zenith.

In the black abyss a network of forked lightning began to interweave, like writhing serpents of fire.

"Oh!" cried Lina, "we shall be drenched! Let us go to Godwin's, or anywhere!"

"It will be as bad as keeping on," objected Jim. "We can never get there before the rain."

"Oh, but we can try! Come! come!"

And now in terror at the lightning, as much as with fear of the rain, Lina turned her horse's head toward the ranch, without waiting for her escort's assent.

There was nothing for it but to follow her, and with misgivings apparent in the pallor of his face and the defiant set of his features, Jim made a virtue of necessity, and spurred to her side.

"If we must go," he said, "let us try to get some advantage out of it."

"Wake up, Nell!"

And he struck Lina's mare with a whip that had hung at his saddlebow.

But why had he allowed himself to be thrown off his guard, so that the cadence of that word "must" stung his companion's delicate sense so that she looked round at him with surprise and wondering anxiety?

"What is it, Jim?" she asked, leaning toward him to peer into his face. "Don't you wish to go? It doesn't matter."

"Oh! it's all right to go, of course. I only thought it would be better to be at home."

But that was a lie; and Jim Reardon couldn't lie—most of all to the woman he loved—with equanimity. The tell-tale blood streamed into his face, and for the first time in her experience of him he could not meet her glance.

The girl's lips blanched, and her heart quailed with a sinking dread.

Her first impression had been that she had annoyed him by not facing the storm boldly, as became the prospective bride of a pioneer. But his embarrassment indicated something quite different from this.

Had she stumbled upon a mystery here? Could there be a secret between them?

"Let us go back," she urged in a husky voice, shrinking from the possibility of rushing upon the confirmation of this suspicion.

But the wind was now howling about them, and the thunder bellowing overhead. Sweeping across the heavens, the black cloud had swallowed up the sun, and the only spot of blue sky lay back of the ranch toward which they were speeding.

Five minutes of such pell-mell galloping that they seemed blown before the tempest like witches riding the gale, and they dashed up to the ranch just as the heavens opened, drenching them with an almost level torrent of blinding rain.

"Hallo, the house!" shouted Jim, in tones that made themselves heard even above the roar of the tornado.

As the horses drew up so abruptly as to send the dirt spinning before them, and Jim leaped from the saddle, the door was unfastened, to be blown wide with a bang by the wind that searched every part of the house; and on the threshold, clinging to the jambs on either side, to resist the force of the blast that blew her garments and her hair streaming behind her, appeared a girl, one glance at whom sent Lina's heart up into her throat.

CHAPTER III.

THE RIVALS.

GAY GOODWIN was tall, and of a compactness of build that gave her almost masculine strength, without robbing her of the roundness of femininity.

Her complexion was a dead white, on which her scarlet lips and straight black brows stood out in vivid contrast.

Her hair, torn down by the wind in her momentary struggle with the door, was unusually long and abundant, as straight and black as an

Indian's, and though almost as coarse, yet of a glossy smoothness that redeemed it to rare beauty.

But it was her eyes that electrified all who came within range of their level fire.

Many a would-be swain had felt their javelins of scorn pierce to the quick when, love-emboldened, he allowed himself to become "a little too previous."

Few had felt the power of their lingering glances of tender sentiment.

The first expression Lina Merrill saw in those eyes, fixed upon Jim Reardon, was the burning light of eager expectancy.

An instant later they were turned upon herself, cold, hard, repellent, in a penetrating scrutiny.

The lips that had been apart, were suddenly closed; the head that had been thrust forward, was drawn back and erect with challenging defiance.

As plainly as words could have made the demand, this change of demeanor asked:

"Who are you, and what right have you here?"

Jim Reardon's actions answered the question in as unequivocal terms.

Catching Lina out of the saddle, he ran with her in his arms into the house, Gay shrinking back to allow them passage.

So quickly was this done, that the girl received only a dash of rain, which, here beading her lip like a crystal tear-drop, there making a stray lock of hair cling to her cheek, only added the piquancy of wind-blown dishabille to her beauty.

"Miss Godwin—Miss Merrill!" was Jim Reardon's introduction, delivered with the nervous precipitancy of a man who went at an embarrassing ceremony as he might take a plunge in cold water.

With a nervous laugh he went on, though avoiding Gay's eye:

"We shall be dependent upon your hospitality for shelter from the storm. It has fairly swept us to your door."

The women bowed to each other with as marked coldness on one side as on the other. There was not even a pretense of murmuring the ordinary conventional words of acknowledgment. Neither was glad to know the other, and both restrained the polite lie.

Then, with a bluntness common only among those who have not been trained to mask their feelings behind hypocritical smiles and courtly phrases, Gay Godwin answered Jim:

"Yes," she assented, "you have e'en a most forgot the way hyar, lately. It's got so it takes a storm to blow you in."

Jim was spared the perplexity of having to find a graceful answer to this awkward observation, by Sat Godwin, who seized his hand, shouting his bluff welcome above the hubbub of the storm:

"Waal, bless my soul an' body, Reardon, you're a wind-fall, an' no mistake! But what's this hyar what you've brung along with ye? I reckon our Gay'll hev to stan' around, ef she 'lows to pull an even swingle-tree with her. 'Tain't fa'r, ole man, fur to pit the latest gim-cracks from the States ag'in' the rough-an-tumble outfit what we hev to touse our gals in out hyar. Haw! haw! haw! haw!"

And Sat Godwin swayed his body back and forth, slapped his thighs, and stamped in boisterous enjoyment of his joke.

Wishing this father and daughter in the bottom of the Dead Sea, Jim—crimson to the roots of his hair, and not daring to look at Lina to see the effect of this revelation—muttered something about the horses, and was about to bolt out of the house which had accorded him so warm a reception, but his host would not hear to it.

"To Guinea with ye!" he cried, to render the spirit of his generous indignation rather than the exact letter in which it was clothed. "You stay whar ye be. No man don't go out into no storm to see to no hosses, what comes to Sat Godwin's ranch fur shelter."

"Hyar, Jack! What're you roostin' on yer hams fur? Git?"

And holding to his guest's sleeve to restrain him, he seized his son by the shoulder and shoved him toward the door.

Jack had not held back from this duty through dread of a wetting, but only because his chuckle head was so taken up with admiration of Lina and enjoyment of his sister's discomfiture that this claim of hospitality had not occurred to him.

Treating the girls to a last grin that made his face look not unlike a distorted flapjack, he dove through the door, only to discover that the

horses had already, of their own accord, taken refuge under a shed.

Now Jack was not partial to a gratuitous ducking; so, seeing that there was nothing called for but the removal of the saddles, which could very well wait, he had scarcely bobbed out when he bobbed back again, and stood dripping and laughing in the middle of the room.

Sat Godwin's next care proved that, like all true hosts, he believed that the center and source of comfort is in the stomach.

"You're jest in time fur grub, bless the Lord!" he cried, rubbing his hands in keen anticipation of the enjoyment he was about to confer. "We hain't no great shakes; but I reckon Ma Godwin'll give ye a fa'r settin'-out, ef the hurricane hain't whisked all the corn-dodger up the chimney."

"Maybe you don't take to the grunter kindly, ma'am, bein's as you're from the States, I take it?" to Lina. "But out hyar we 'low as it's wholesome fodder; an' it do stick to yer ribs with most."

The apartment in which they stood was called the "best room," though of all that goes to make a place cozy and homelike it was as barren as a barn loft.

The floor was bare, the walls blank, and the window curtainless. The furniture consisted of a pine table, three or four wooden-bottomed chairs, and a rocker like unto them. On the shelf over the fireplace stood a partly-burned candle in an old-fashioned brass candlestick, this last chiefly for ornament.

In one corner leaned two guns, with powder and bullet-pouches hanging from their muzzles; and near them, on the floor, lay a Mexican saddle.

The kitchen, the true living room, adjoined this bleak barrack, which was nothing but a shelter from the weather.

From the time that she had had her fling at Jim, Gay Godwin had stood in sullen and savage disregard of every duty that devolved upon her, never uttering a word, never deigning so much as a glance further at Lina, but keeping her burning eyes fixed upon Jim.

Suddenly, her pent rage finding vent in a burst of blinding tears, she turned and rushed toward the door of the kitchen, to come into violent collision with her mother, who was just then entering to welcome her guests.

Mrs. Godwin was a living proof of her husband's declaration that "the grunter do stick to one's ribs."

Breathless at all times, she only lifted her hands in mute protest, as her stormy daughter brushed by without a word of apology.

Then with unruffled good-nature she came forward, taking Lina's jaunty hat and gauntlets, and remarking, as she glanced dubiously at the trailing skirts of her riding habit:

"I reckon them traipsin' petticoats ain't no God-send, slappin' around one's heels. Ef so be you're agreeable, we kin give ye one o' Gay's frocks fur to wear from now till bed-time; fur o' course you won't think o' goin' out o' this house no time to-night."

Lina murmured something not very intelligible, except that she declined to put her hostess to so much trouble; and then, feeling a little uncomfortable in the company of this girl from the States, in whom she could not help seeing a formidable rival of her daughter, Mrs. Godwin made the duties of the kitchen an excuse for leaving her to the entertainment of her husband.

Sat was warmly canvassing the results of a recent round-up, and Jim was glad of any excuse that obviated the necessity of speech with Lina just then.

If Sat had not had an inordinate liking for hearing himself talk, he must have been annoyed by Jim's random answers.

Our young lover was cudgeling his brain for some plausible explanation, when they were again alone, of the remarkable scene to which he had treated his lady-love.

It so happened that there was nothing to interfere with Lina's overhearing what was going on in the kitchen, where Jack had followed his sister.

First came the sounds of some one crossing the floor with angry strides.

Then a guarded protest, in Mrs. Godwin's voice:

"Gabriella! Gay!"

Then a fierce defiance, hoarse with concentrated rage:

"Git out o' my way! I kin take care o' myself!"

The outer door was thrown open violently, admitting a flurry of wind, to be followed by a bang that shook the house, even cutting short

an oath with which Sat Godwin was about to impeach the equity of a decision of the Judge of the Plains that had been against him.

An ejaculation of despair from the mother called forth a characteristic effort at consolation from the son.

"You leave her alone. She ain't sugar, to melt; though she's got tang enough fur salt. But thar ain't nothin' like a souse o' water to take the devil out o' a spittin' cat."

Sat hurriedly closed the momentary break in his denunciation of the Western sense of justice.

He was used to these breezes in his household, but he did not care to treat the outside world to them.

Supper announced, they repaired to the kitchen, where a smoking meal, but no daughter of the house, awaited them.

With tremulous hand Lina lifted her cup of tea, but set it down again, scarcely tasted.

Then she essayed to take something from her plate; but before it reached her bloodless lips, her hand faltered, and then let the morsel it carried sink back to its place on her plate.

With a murmur of excuses, the girl hastily arose from the table, and hurried toward the exit into the next room.

"It's the grunter," observed Sat, though the reproachful glance which he cast after her showed that this was only a cover to his knowledge of her real motive. "They mostly gags at it."

Jack grinned.

"They've all got it in 'em, as big as a mink!" was his silent reflection. "Mincin' as she looks, won't she comb Jim Reardon's wool fur him, though, when she gits him alone?"

The picture of dismay, Mrs. Godwin was about to follow her guest, after having turned twice round in her confused quest of some place to set down the pan of corn-dodger she had just taken from the oven.

But Jim Reardon interposed, saying, rather huskily, as he closed the door through which Lina had retreated:

"I beg your pardon! But Miss Merrill has not been feeling very well. At such times she does not like to be disturbed."

At this Jack grinned again.

"He's got cheek, he has! But I'll bet my hat she won't be so tender about disturbin' him, before he's much older."

The others accepted this explanation gravely, though Sat could no longer pretend not to see the skeleton at his board.

Meanwhile Lina, alone, took her stand at the window, staring out into the storm like a newly caged bird, or a prisoner who for the first time feels the iron bars between him and liberty.

Why did she suddenly start and stare, pressing her hands upon her bosom, that rose and fell with tumultuous pants?

Why did she turn and glance in wild uncertainty at the door between the room in which she stood and the kitchen?

Why did she, with sudden resolve, throw open the front door, and rush out into the drenching rain without stopping to close it behind her?

If it had been a returning lover whom she was mourning as dead, she could not have sped to his embrace more headlong than she now ran to meet—Little Shoo-fly!

CHAPTER IV.

THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER.

"'Fo' de Lawd high golly, Missy Lina," was Clem's astonished greeting, "has you done gone ravin' 'stracted?"

And his eyes would have made peeled onions green with envy, while his mouth was a gaping bag of red flannel.

"Take me home!" cried the girl, now with a hysterical sob in her voice.

"What's de matter?" demanded Clem, with quick foreboding. "What's done happen 'long o' Mars' Jim?"

"Take me home!" she repeated, peremptorily.

Looking very like a thoroughly-ducked monkey, if not like the proverbial drowned rat, Clem, who had ridden his horse under the shed to which Lina had run, where the mare awaited her, yet saddled because of Jack's tenderness of his own hide—Clem dismounted, to help her into the saddle.

He obeyed, under protest, however; for "Mars' Jim" ran "Missy Lina" a very close race in his affections.

Although his experience of young ladies was somewhat limited, yet his knowledge of human nature in general was sufficient to enable him to make a shrewd guess, that only an internal storm could make this young lady, in all her finery, so disregardful of the external storm.

He knew something of the relations which,

according to the gossips, had existed between Mars' Jim and "ole Sat Godwin's gal," and it was from his rattling tongue that Lina had first heard Gay's name.

Clem had hailed her coming as a means of delivering Mars' Jim from the wiles of "dat she débble, what don' let nobody rest easy nohow!" and now, was everything to be balked?

He threw the waterproof over Lina, though in such a tearing storm it was of doubtful service, and then they were in the saddle and away.

How they rode! But Clem, poorly mounted, was soon left behind.

Lina, fearing pursuit, goaded her horse in the teeth of the wind, careless that she was half-blinded by the pelting rain.

"Dese hyeah white folks," reflected Clem, sagely, "has lots o' trials an' tribulations. De Lawd don't let 'em rest no more'n we-uns. Dah ain't no furgittin' dat ye're on dish yah side o' Jurdan!"

Meanwhile, Lina was thinking what was to happen when she reached the place for which she was now making.

How fondly had she thought of it as home! But now it was his home, no longer hers! It should never be!

She would not see him again, under any pretext. In the morning she would pack her few belongings, and return to the States, putting two thousand miles between her and that brief dream of happiness.

A spasm of fierce pain pierced her heart at the thought, in spite of her determined efforts to keep his treachery before her eyes.

She was in the midst of this struggle, when a lull in the storm permitted her to hear the beat of hoofs behind her.

The thought of being overtaken before she had reached shelter drove her almost mad; and setting her teeth she spurred on, resolved to spurn him if he dared to touch her, to even speak to her.

But presently she heard a voice that was too high pitched for his, calling to her.

Thinking it Little Shoo-fly, she glanced over her shoulder, and discovered—a rider with fluttering garments like her own.

It was none other than Gay Godwin!

Now, Lina Merrill was small in stature, but she had a mighty spirit. If overtaken by her desperate rival, she would be entirely at her mercy. Gay was so much larger and stronger than that, if it came to a personal encounter, she would have almost the advantage of a man. Lina did not deceive herself into thinking that she was the kind of a woman to content herself with hair-pulling and hard names. She *might* take it into her head to kill.

However, scorning her as a rival, it should never be said that she had run from her as an enemy.

The Eastern girl drew up her horse and boldly faced round.

Gay Godwin had rushed out into the storm like a demented creature.

Her one glance at Lina had been enough to convince her that her chance of winning Jim Reardon by her personal charms was gone forever.

In leaving the house, her one thought had been that she could not endure to pass the night under the same roof with her successful rival, just as Lina had been unable to bring herself to eat bread that had possibly been touched by the woman about whom her lover had deceived her.

She had thought, so far as she thought anything coherently, to ride the night out in mad defiance of the tempest.

What to her were darkness, desolation, discomfort, the terror of the battling elements? She had that within her which would make her oblivious to them all.

Whither she went she never heeded. She wanted motion—mad, headlong activity. She had fled, but fortune had brought them together again.

She rode up, now looking gaunt and wild. The storm of passion which raged within, had made dark circles about her eyes. The outer storm, drenching her, had left her hair hanging down her cheeks in stringy locks.

"Sol!" was her greeting, as she looked at Lina curiously, "you found the place too hot for you too!"

"What do you want with me?" demanded Lina, as if glances were javelins, and words, blows.

"I want to see how much it takes to make Jim Reardon furgit the way to our house," replied Gay, with no pretense at disguise.

If she had loved him less, Lina would have had a ready retort; but now she was almost

stified by the thought that Jim must still care for this girl, or he would have been indifferent to their meeting.

In spite of every disadvantage, Gay displayed a wild sort of beauty still.

"That ain't all," she pursued. "I want to know what you're allowin' to do about it. If you reckon as I'm the one to stand mopin' while you put this thing through, thar's whar you fool yerself!"

Still Lina preserved unbroken silence. She was too proud to tell her rival that she only too gladly yielded the field to her.

"You seem to have lost yer tongue," said Gay, adding grimly: "You'll find it ag'in before I git through with ye."

Now Lina answered, in cold scorn:

"If that is all you have to say, perhaps you will not detain me any longer."

"Only fur one word more. It'll stand you in hand to tell Jim Reardon that you have other engagements, an' then git out o' this country as soon as you kin. One thing you kin freeze to—you'll never be Mrs. Jim Reardon—never while my head's above ground!"

The ending was a menace as fierce as ever passed between bloodless lips. The woman's eyes blazed, and her whole body quivered, as in her intensity of passion she forced her horse toward Lina's, to hiss the last words fairly in her face.

But the Eastern girl, apparently not disturbed by this, looked past her, with a quick-coming apprehension which was not of personal violence, and pointing with outstretched finger, exclaimed:

"If you wish to stay here for a meeting, you are at liberty to do so; but shall not be in my presence!"

And where she had turned her horse's head toward her enemy, she now turned it away from her lover.

Gay looked back over the road, and far away saw Jim Reardon approaching, bowed before the driving rain, yet riding like a man who had more than life at stake.

"It is after her!" said the jealous woman to herself. "It was nothing to him that I went out into the storm. He knew it!"

Then rose the demon of her nature again, and she forced her horse after Lina, till she rode beside her, bending forward and staring at her with a gaze that caused the other girl to suspend her breath with a gasp.

What she was thinking was—and her eyes revealed it almost as plainly as words:

"If I had a revolver, or a knife! If I had guessed of such a chance as this! I have my bare hands! I might pull her hair down, or leave a scratch on her pretty face, and a rent in her dainty clothes!"

She laughed aloud, in shrill derision, at the thought of her hatred ending in such a fiasco as this.

Then her eyes fixed themselves on Lina's slender white throat, as if fascinated.

Another thought came to her.

"I might have time!" she said to herself. "He's a good ways off yet. I'd give her to him, and welcome, that way!"

Once more she laughed; but now her laugh was low, and terrible to witness.

It was more a wild, spasmodic pant than a natural laugh.

In spite of all her resolution, it curdled Lina Merrill's blood!

"She means to kill me!" she said to herself. "She's going to try to strangle me to death!"

CHAPTER V.

THE MAKING-UP.

PRIDE might induce her to face her enemy in a general way, but it could not stifle her womanly fears in the presence of a clearly defined peril.

In terror Lina reined her horse aside, only to be followed up by her infuriate rival, whose eyes now glowed like coals of fire, her fatal purpose strengthening with the signs of fear in her would-be victim.

Forced against the face of the cliff which they were just then passing, Lina could retreat no further. Should she scream? Should she slip from the saddle?

Now so near that she had but to reach out and clutch her victim, Gay dropped her bridle-rein, feeling her soul shaken by a storm of ferocity to which her wildest burst of temper heretofore was nothing.

But at the very crisis of her murderous assault, came an interruption.

"G'way, shoo-fly!"

"Clem! Clem!" gasped Lina.

With a smile which was a hideous grin of sar-

castic rage at her ill fortune, Gay reined her horse aside, and dashed away, leaving the warning:

"You hain't hyeared the last o' me yet!"

While Lina stopped to parley with her rival, Little Shoo-fly had picked up the distance he had lost in the race, and made his appearance round a bend just in time to prevent a personal encounter.

Notwithstanding her gratitude to him, Lina did not stop to express it.

There was another, coming on like the wind. Him she longed to elude. So, as before, Clem saw only the flying heels of her horse.

Later, Mars' Jim passed him, without a word of question or explanation.

Just before she reached the Reardon Ranch, Lina heard her lover's voice calling after her.

She did not look round, but instead redoubled her efforts to gain the house before him.

As she drew near, the door was opened by Mother Reardon, who held up her hands in dismay, at the drenched condition of the girl, while she smiled indulgently at what she thought a merry race between the two young people, whose courtship renewed the joys of her own youth.

"Oh, you poor creature!" she exclaimed, as Lina threw herself from the saddle. "Come right in here! You will have caught your death!"

While Mammy, who was at her back, declared:

"Don't you be afeard o' dat, Missy Lina. I's done got some yarb tea what'll knock—"

But with an ejaculation between a sob and a cry of distress, Lina brushed between them, and rushed on up the stairway and into her own room.

The expression of her face showed those who loved her that something was amiss; and the next moment Jim dashed up, looking like a man who had just witnessed the destruction of all that the world held dear to him.

"Oh, Jim! my poor boy! what is it?" panted his mother, seizing his arm with her shaking hands.

As if taking her anxiety by contagion, Mammy asked:

"Whah's dat boy, Clem?"

Of course it was his mother whom Jim answered.

"Wait! I can't tell you!—not now!" he ejaculated, brushing past her, and on up the stairs after Lina.

The good woman followed him. Whatever his suffering, his mother must be near.

Going straight to Lina's door, he knocked upon it, and listened with his heart in his throat.

There was no answer, nor sound of any kind from within.

He called:

"Lina!"

Still no response.

There was no fastening to the door, save a latch.

He deliberately lifted it, and crossed the threshold.

At the sound of this intrusion, the girl sprang up from the bed on which she had thrown herself, face downward, in all her dripping garments.

"What! Dare you come in here?" she cried, facing him in amazement and anger.

"I dare do anything which will repair this breach between us," he answered, steadily approaching her.

"Don't you touch me!—don't you dare to touch me!" she cried, seeing his purpose.

Nevertheless he put his arms about her, with the gentle firmness of one who was determined that nothing should stand between him and his resolve.

She was so astonished that she did not struggle to free herself, but only stared in his face.

"Now," he said, "you must listen to me—"

"I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!" she interrupted, with a fierce outburst, a rush of tears blinding her and choking her voice.

"You have no real cause to. If you will—"

"You have deceived me! I shall never believe another word that you say!"

It was like a stinging blow in the face. It staggered him for a moment. But he recovered himself, and went on steadily:

"On the contrary, you will believe me, when I tell you that no one has any claim upon me whatever, or has ever had."

"You have trifled with us both!" was the passionate retort.

"Lina!"

The reproach in his voice, and perhaps a slight loosening of the arms with which he had held

her as if against any power to tear her from him, caused a sudden turn in the tide of her emotions; and bursting forth:

"Oh, how could you—how could you!"

She dropped her face into her hands, letting them rest against his breast.

He made no reply, but stood so profoundly still and silent, that a hush fell upon her.

Presently she threw back her head, to gaze up into his reproachful eyes.

Then, with another as abrupt change, she flung her arms about his neck, crying:

"Oh, you don't love her? Never mind the past! You don't love her now—now?"

How she clung to him! If he had ever longed for full proof of her attachment, he had it now.

Always she had coquetted with the tie that bound them, gayly coy, ever flitting just within, but just beyond his reach.

But here was a strong cry of the soul's need.

It was easy, after that, to make his peace with her; and a little later she heard him say, just outside her door:

"It's all right now. You may go in. Take good care of her."

"The darling!" murmured a voice, choked with emotion.

And a moment later she was sobbing in Mother Reardon's arms.

Mammy did her share in the bathing and rubbing and administration of "yarb" tea that followed; and freshly dressed, and with her hair combed out and thrown over the arm of the lounge to dry, Lina lay in the flickering light from the great fire-place in the Reardon living-room—as cozy a place as any one need wish to be happy in—with no one by but the one who talked to her in a low tone, perhaps because of his close vicinity.

It was a rather awkward tale to tell—of Gay Godwin's preference for him, whether he would or no. Jim was frank enough to admit that he had sought Gay as a partner at the merry-makings, because she was in many ways more acceptable than any other young woman within fifty miles. But, discovering the turn things were taking, he had, even before Lina's coming, been casting about for some graceful way out of the dilemma in which he found himself.

The trouble was, that Gay was one of those girls who cannot be easily dropped.

Lina made the ordeal as easy for him as possible, she was so ready to believe all he told her.

And then what do you think happened?—I declare, within three days!

On his return from a neighboring railroad-station, Jim Reardon introduced a smiling gentleman; and Lina stood bowing and blushing in the presence of an old admirer of her own!

CHAPTER VI.

A DANGEROUS SECRET.

FROM Little Shoo-fly's point of view, Paul Pasteur was a very unwelcome addition to the household just at that time.

"He's a tip-top gemman, an' all dat," he was forced to admit, scanning Pasteur with a critical eye, as he lolled lazily in a hammock which Mars' Jim had netted for Lina's enjoyment. "But he keeps his finger-nails altogedder too powerful clean! I reckon he done put in de heft of his time dat away. But he ain't no slouch; an' he's got de debble in him, too, fur all his smooove ways. Only Mars' Jim could git away wid a bull raft o' sich like."

Paul had come out to the Western wilds for his summer vacation, he said. He had hunted small game and whipped the trout streams in the East till he knew the thing by heart. It had occurred to him to vary his experience by "taking in" the West. West of the Mississippi, all places were alike to him; so he had presumed on the privileges of a friend, and come where he could combine the pleasure of Miss Merrill's society with the novelty of new surroundings.

It was a little odd that Mars' Jim attached no particular significance to the fact that this nonchalant gentleman had followed Lina two thousand miles. Something in his off-hand statement of the case may have forestalled suspicion.

But Little Shoo-fly asked himself:

"What's he hangin' round hyar fur, while Mars' Jim's away f'om maw'nin' till night? Ef he's come out hyar to hunt, why don't he fall to? I reckon I'll keep an eye on Mister Man!"

What good could result from his "keeping an eye on him," Clem might have found it difficult to state in exact terms.

It was quite easy for Paul to see Lina alone at almost any time, and one day Little Shoo-fly surprised them together not far from the house.

Lina was flushed and angry. Paul Pasteur's face was impassive, with a peculiar look of

something, Little Shoo-fly could not tell just what, behind a mask of self-control.

"What right had you to come here?" were the first words Clem heard from his young mistress.

"No right," admitted Pasteur, with outward humility.

"Then why did you come?"

"I presumed on the privilege of a lover."

"You are no lover of mine! I won't have it so!"

"Can I control my feelings toward you? Then how can you say that they shall not exist?"

"I do say it! You have had your answer, over and over again."

"And a thoroughly consistent one, Lina. I have urged that fact upon my heart; but it is just as firm in its *yes* as you are in your *no*."

"That is nothing to me. I tell you, you are spoiling my enjoyment here. I wish you would go away."

"Lina, will you answer me one thing frankly?"

"I wish you wouldn't call me Lina. I will answer you frankly, if I answer you at all. It depends on what you ask."

"Do you dislike me?"

"No; I have no reason to. But you will make me, if you persist. Don't you see that I feel as if I were guilty of deceit? If you must know, I have promised to marry Mr. Reardon. What would he think of such conversations as this between us? You ought to be ashamed of yourself, coming into his house and treating him this way behind his back! And I ought to be ashamed of myself for permitting you to do it!"

Tears sprang to her eyes. She was thinking of the scene in which she had taxed Jim with disloyalty and deception.

Pasteur drew a long, deep breath.

"It has gone as far as that, then?" he asked, slowly.

"Yes, it has!"

"Dat settles him," declared Little Shoo-fly to himself, with a delighted chuckle. "Now I reckon Mar's Jim 'll hab a cl'ar show."

Paul Pasteur sat very still, looking away in the distance. The very quietness with which he took his disappointment might have awakened misgivings in one more deeply versed in human nature than either Lina or Clem.

Before speaking, he rose to his feet, as one who stays only for a last word.

"Lina—you will permit me to call you Lina once more, and to think of you so always—this is a very bitter blow. I have never let you see the depth of my feeling for you, and now you will never know."

He hesitated, and then began again.

"I am going to make a request which will probably seem strange to you. I don't know whether any one else would feel about it as I do; but—"

Again he stopped, seeming to struggle with himself. He was not looking at her, but away off at the horizon.

The girl's eyes, distended with wondering suspense, watched him closely.

"I want to continue near you a little longer," he said, swallowing spasmodically.

He passed his hand across his face. It was very pale. Suddenly he turned his eyes full upon her.

"I always supposed," he said, with a wavering smile, "that if anything of this kind should happen to me, I should feel very desperate about it, and fiercely hate the man who had cheated me out of my happiness. I don't feel that way at all. But I am full of fear and uncertainty for—for you. You see, I have so long looked forward to protecting you from everything, that I'm afraid to trust you to another man. I want to know whether he is worthy of you—as near worthy as any one can be. I want to have a chance to know him a little better; and then maybe I can go away more—more—I hardly know what to call it. It won't be contentment. But I shall feel safer, if he is all right."

He smiled again, but his eyes were blood-shot with repressed tears.

"Oh!" cried the girl. "I can't tell you how it hurts me to see you suffer on my account. Have I done anything? Am I to blame?"

"You? Oh, no! How could you help it? It was only seeing you."

She dropped her face into her hands.

"I think you had better go away—now," she said, very gently.

"When is it to take place?" he asked.

"Three weeks from to-day."

He caught his breath.

"Let me stay," he pleaded, after a while, "till it is over."

"What good can come of it?"

"I will not annoy you, by word or sign."

"It is very, very unwise."

"If you do not forbid."

She remained silent.

He went up to her, and took her hand.

Into her eyes he gazed as one might take leave of a dying friend.

As if constrained by his passion, she looked steadily back, frightened and tremulous, her lips falling apart.

Suddenly he bent, and touched only the tips of her fingers, in a kiss so light that she could scarcely perceive the pressure; yet it burned in her memory long after.

"One so rich as he should not grudge so little!" he said, brokenly—"so little to him; so much to me!"

Then he turned, and walked hastily away.

With crimson cheeks, the girl sprang up, and ran to the house, to shut herself in her room, and endeavor to calm the feelings that were running riot in her bosom.

Had she done wrong? Was there a spark of disloyalty to Jim in the pity she felt for Paul? He had ever been kind to her. She had liked him, in any relation but that of a lover. She had told him so, long before she knew Jim.

When Jim returned that night, she hovered around him with a tenderness that had something of remorse in it.

A hundred times she was on the point of telling him what had passed between her and Paul; and as often the remembrance of the motive Paul had given for wanting to stay near her, and the thought that it would be impossible if Jim knew, restrained her.

These are the mistakes we often make. There is nothing so dangerous as a secret between persons who have a right to expect perfect openness of each other.

When Paul Pasteur fled away from the direction of the house, and Lina toward it, a head—not that of Little Shoo-fly, but the head of a woman—lifted above the frondage of the brush-wood, and a pair of fiercely exultant eyes glared after her, while their own chuckled: "Ha-ha! ha-ha! this is what is going on! I have you now, my beauty!"

And half an hour after quitting Lina's presence, Paul Pasteur stood face to face with Gay Godwin! If Lina had only known this!

But even Little Shoo-fly's watchfulness was eluded here. He had no interest in Pasteur's movements apart from his mistress.

Indeed, this meeting was unexpected to Paul himself. He had never seen Gay before.

CHAPTER VII.

PLOTTERS IN COUNCIL.

WHEN Paul Pasteur rode away, it was to seek solitude where he could drop the mask, and think his thoughts and give vent to his feelings without restraint.

Nothing was further from his purpose than to abandon his pursuit of Lina. Having secured his position near her, the only question was, how he could circumvent Jim Reardon, and snatch his prize from him, even at the last moment.

"Have her I will!" he said to himself, again and again, "by fair means or foul. But how? I might run away with her. That would rob him, without satisfying me. I want her to give herself to me voluntarily. Loving him as she does, how can I induce her to give him up? She don't dislike me. On the contrary, I think she rather likes me. If he were out of the way, she might turn to me.

"He out of the way!" he repeated to himself.

There was a long pause, in which his face was a study.

Paul Pasteur had broken the Decalogue in more clauses than one. He had even put himself within the reach of the law before now—in a gentlemanly way, however.

Now the thoughts that skulked in the shadows of his mind, only half coming into view, had an ugly look to him.

He could not contemplate the "removal" of a man with equanimity.

"No!" he declared, decidedly. "I must find some other way. I might pick a quarrel with him and shoot him in a duel, with no great violence to popular notions out here. But she would hate me forever.

"But, if not that, what then?"

As if to answer this question, Gay Godwin here made her appearance.

As has been said, Paul Pasteur had never seen her before.

He was struck by her beauty.

"With a dash of diablerie!" he said to himself, eying her critically as she approached. "What is the matter with her? I'm glad she isn't after me with that look!"

He smiled, as much in amusement as in greeting, as he lifted his hat to her.

It was only the salutation of a stranger in a country so thinly settled as to warrant such a waiving of ceremony.

What was his astonishment to see her draw reins.

"Good-afternoon, sir!" was her greeting.

"Madame, this is an unexpected pleasure!" he exclaimed, stopping also, with a sudden increase in the animation of his countenance.

"You are Mr. Pasteur?"

"That is my name."

"You are stopping at—at Reardon's Ranch?"

"I have that pleasure. You may permit me to add, that it will considerably increase my enjoyment to learn that I have you for a near neighbor."

She waved aside this compliment with an impatient toss of her hand.

"None o' that, ef you please!" she expostulated, bluntly.

Paul Pasteur was not used to such slaps in the face. He first stared in astonishment, then flushed with resentment, but finally shrugged his shoulders with a laugh.

"It is plain," he observed, "that the manners of this delightful country are a little different from what I am used to. However, it is all charming!"

And he laughed again, with thinly veiled insolence.

"I like that better," said Gay, not at all disturbed. "But you have no call to insult me in either way. It probably strikes you as a little odd that a stranger should stop you without ceremony. But I have only a business transaction in view; and that don't call for introductions."

"I shall be delighted to know you, either socially, or in a business way," replied Pasteur, still bantering.

"It is about—about the girl stopping at Reardon's," said Gay, a flush coming into her face, in spite of her fierce determination to carry her purpose through without regard to conventionalities.

"Ah!" ejaculated Pasteur, in surprise.

"If you want her, why don't you make off with her?" demanded Gay, fairly in a tone of upbraiding.

"Well!" exclaimed Pasteur, with increasing astonishment. "You don't draw it mild, as they say out here!"

"I have no wish to draw it mild!" retorted Gay. "But you are a man. Why don't you prove the man, and carry your point, whether or no? If I had your chance, I'd—I'd—I wouldn't sneak off like a whipped cur, with his tail between his legs!"

By this time Pasteur was fairly breathless.

"May I ask," he said, slowly, "what interest you have in this matter?"

"It don't make any difference what interest I have in it. It's what interest you have in it. You say you want the girl; she says she prefers some one else; and you say, 'Bless you, my children! Bah! if you made love to me in that fashion, I'd lay my quirt over your back!'"

And she flourished a cowboy's riding-whip which she carried.

Paul Pasteur had never had such stinging contempt flung into his teeth. He turned pale with humiliation, even while he felt that the situation justified a laugh.

But the girl's intense earnestness swept him along in its passionate tide, compelling him to treat the matter seriously.

It did more than this. It suggested her concern in the case, and started the thought that she might be made use of to his advantage.

"I don't know what sort of love-making is usual here," he said, "but where I come from we do not quarrel with the lady in such a case. Suppose I call Jim Reardon out, and shoot him? I am called a dead-shot."

Gay started, and turned pale.

"You have no call for that," she objected, quickly. "Why don't you do the easy way? Carry her off! She'll soon become reconciled. She said herself that she more than half likes you already."

"How do you happen to know so much about my affairs, may I ask?"

"I had the pleasure of overhearing your milk-and-water proposal, just now."

"Indeed? May I ask your name?"

"Most anybody could tell you. I am Gay Godwin."

"Ah! I have heard of you."

And Pasteur smiled just perceptibly.

The fact was, he had listened to some rather blunt gossip, in which Gay's undisguised preference for Jim Reardon was made the subject of a brutal jest.

However, he was not disposed to make sport of her discomfiture.

"Will you be frank with me?" he asked, coming to a sudden resolve. "One moment, if you please! You said just now that this was to be a business interview. Pray consider it entirely so. If I ask you a personal question, it will be with a view to turning the information I receive to our mutual benefit."

"Drive ahead! What do you want to know?"

"All about your relations with Jim Reardon. I have been told that there were some love passages between you, before Miss Merrill came out here. Is that true?"

"He used to hang around our house a good deal," answered Gay, with a blending of defiance and shame-facedness.

"Were you engaged?"

"No!"

That monosyllable was shot out like the crack of a pistol.

"Pardon me!—did he make love to you?"

"He never put it in words. But he might as well. Everybody understood it so."

Pasteur took time to consider this answer.

Meanwhile, his steady gaze disconcerted Gay.

"What are you 'lowin' to make out of all this?" she demanded, impatiently.

Paul took the liberty to doubt the strict accuracy of her answer, though of course he did not tell her so.

"Does Miss Merrill know about this?" he asked, with businesslike coolness.

Gay started, with an evil smile.

"She has had very good reason to know about it lately," she declared. "But I suppose he laid himself out to smooth the thing over to her."

"Ah!" exclaimed Pasteur, seeing that he had started something of interest. "Will you tell me all about this?"

Gay hesitated a moment, and then with sudden, desperate resolve, plunged into a description of what had occurred when Lina was driven into her house by the storm.

"Good! good!" ejaculated Pasteur, rubbing his hands with satisfaction.

Instantly the outlines of a plot formed in his fertile mind.

In a rapid flow of speech he laid it before her, thinking out the details as he went along.

Flushing and paling alternately with excitement, Gay listened in breathless absorption, and at the conclusion she seized his hand, crying:

"Done! done! That's all I ask! I couldn't think it out myself, but you've hit it just right."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MISSING BRIDEGROOM.

FOR two weeks Paul Pasteur played the character Lina expected of him.

Then came a change that made the girl's heart beat with dread of she knew not what.

Jim was much away from home, on business the nature of which Lina did not know, leaving his guest for the most part to seek his own amusement in his own way.

He took it for granted that Paul was accompanied by Little Shoo-fly on his hunting and fishing excursions; but the fact was, Paul had preferred to go alone.

One night he returned, betraying an undercurrent of feeling which he seemed to straggle in vain to hide.

What startled Lina, was the altered expression in his eyes, when she caught him covertly looking at her, and something, not hatred apparently, but scorn, that lurked under his drooping eyelids when Jim was by.

There were times when he was swayed by a mad elation; when he could not rest quiet; when he seemed on the point of throwing his arms about Lina, or casting himself at her feet.

What did all this mean?

A thousand times was the girl tempted to make an open confession to her lover, only to be restrained by the fear of casting a shadow over her wedding, which was now so near at hand.

"It will be only a few days longer," she said to herself. "Then, some time, when dear Jim has known me long enough and well enough to be sure that I couldn't have had a disloyal thought, I will tell him everything."

So came her wedding day, as bright and sunny as bride was ever blessed with.

"It is a good omen!" she cried. "I have been worrying myself all for nothing. What difference will it make how Paul Pasteur feels

toward Jim or me?—though of course I should rather have him feel kindly, if he will."

Jim was away, and was not expected home till evening.

The ranch-house, however, was gay with signs of festivity long before nightfall.

For fifty miles around people had come to the wedding.

There was one notable exception. The Godwins were not there. Sat had urged his daughter to save appearances; but she had stubbornly resisted, and he would not have any of his family there without her.

The parson arrived in time for supper, on the preparation of which Mammy greatly prided herself.

But what detained Jim? Everything was now waiting for him.

"He should have made it a point not to be late, on this of all days in his life!" said the good mother—only to herself, however. Nothing would have induced her to even hint to any one else the slightest criticism of her only son.

Father Reardon was everywhere, cracking his jokes to keep everybody laughing, the more as the time passed, and now one and now another asked after Jim.

The bride expectant was not yet to be seen. A lot of giggling girls were flitting in and out of her room, exclaiming on her loveliness when they were with her, and piquing the curiosity of every one by their whispered confidences when they came out.

"The supper will be spoiled!" whispered Mother Reardon to her husband, catching him by chance where they were free from observation. "Jim will have no time to dress. He ought to have been home an hour—two hours ago, at least. What shall I do?"

Father Reardon meditated a moment, and then ventured:

"We couldn't go on with the feedin', I suppose, and then have the ceremony later?"

"Have the supper before the wedding, and without the groom!" cried Mother Reardon, throwing up her hands in horror of such a monstrous proceeding.

"Well, grub is grub," replied Mr. Reardon, scratching his head dubiously. "It will get cold, if you let it stand. And I suppose they'd be married just as fast, if you made it after supper, instead of before. Jim oughtn't to be late."

"And is Lina to be punished for his transgression?"

"Lina? Why, she needn't go without her supper. She has eaten without him before."

"Oh!" ejaculated Mother Reardon. "Anything but a man! Do you suppose she could sit there with everybody quizzing her, and all the young minxes ready to giggle at her for being kept waiting at such a time?"

"Well, I suppose that's the woman of it," said Mr. Reardon, resignedly. "But, what's to be done? That's the question."

It was a question that pressed more and more for solution. Everybody was beginning to exchange glances with everybody else, and many whispered with a lifting of the eyebrows.

One malicious damsel, who envied Lina her beauty, while at the same time she was most profuse in her professions of friendship, let slip a remark about the time, bringing a sudden hush of embarrassment upon the rest.

Nothing had been said to Lina about Jim's absence, but she could not fail to see that something was wrong. All of the girls about her knew it, whatever it was—something which they had been keeping from her.

Then it suddenly struck her that she had been dressed for some time, and only awaiting the announcement that all was in readiness for the greatest change of her life.

Her cheek paled, and she shot one lightning glance around the circle of eyes that dropped before hers. Then, with a mighty effort, she plunged into gay banter, as if she had noticed nothing.

"My! but she's proud!" whispered one of the girls. "Who would 'a' thought it, to look at her?"

Lina was proud. Whatever the hitch—and at that time she dreamed of nothing more serious than a temporary embarrassment—she resolved that no one should see that she was disconcerted by it.

But soon Mrs. Reardon was forced to accept her husband's suggestion.

"Come! run away, girls!" she said, making her appearance in the room of the waiting bride. "I want one little moment, for the last time, before our dear Lina is real kith and kin of mine."

They went, exchanging significant glances.

Mrs. Reardon closed the door, and turned to face the white-lipped, yet self-possessed, bride expectant.

"What is it, mother?" she asked, both with her lips and her questioning eyes.

Mrs. Reardon put her arms about the girl, saying, very tenderly:

"My dear, something has detained Jim, and we can't wait supper for him any longer, without spoiling the food and the tempers of our guests at the same time. You won't be very much annoyed at having to go to the table without him, and having the ceremony afterward, will you? You can slip off your dress, you know, and change it for a more suitable one, in a minute."

"That won't be necessary," answered Lina. "Let me go as I am."

She gave Mrs. Reardon a reassuring kiss, much to that good lady's relief.

"You're a dear good girl," she said, "to take things so sensibly. Jim don't deserve such a wife. I'll give him a good scolding, no matter what has kept him. What can it be?"

But she checked herself, lest she arouse Lina's fears for Jim's safety.

They went down Lina looking the inquisitive ones in the eye with calm directness.

But her heart stood still when she saw Paul Pasteur.

He was white to the lips, and so deeply moved that he could not disguise it from her, at least.

Little Shoo-fly waited on the table, but so absent-mindedly that he spilled some tea over the dress of a lady who was as prompt of action as forcible of speech, so that he was soundly berated and vigorously boxed about the ears before he knew what he had done to deserve such summary treatment.

At the time he was rolling his eyes between Lina and Paul Pasteur, and saying to himself:

"It's all along o' dat rascallion, sure as shootin'! He's done sot ag'in' dis yeah weddin', an' he won't hab it nohow. He must 'a' conjured Mars' Jim—broke his boss's leg, or sumfin', to put him afoot."

It did not occur to Clem that Pasteur could have done more than exercise some charm of the evil eye, since, as he knew, Paul had not been away from the house all that day.

Indeed, the plotter had made his presence conspicuous, so that no one could connect him in any way with Jim's non-appearance.

It was especially important to his project that Lina should be free from doubt in this matter.

When it came to cleaning up the wreck of the festive meal, Mammy "went gunning" for "dat boy Clem," but failed to find him.

He had kept his eye on Paul Pasteur, and had followed him when he slipped out in the darkness on the pretense of going to look for his host's return.

Clem saw him stride back and forth in the restlessness of a man devoured by anxious suspense. He heard him mutter, without being lucky enough to make out any of his words.

But presently the boy was filled with shivering dread for a moment, by a figure in white flitting so close by him that it seemed as if he must inevitably be discovered, if it were a living person of flesh and blood.

His first impression was of ghostly visitation. A second glance showed him that it was Lina, in her wedding dress, so profoundly agitated that she saw only Paul Pasteur, to whom she was hastening.

"What is the meaning of all this; and what have you had to do with it?" was her fierce demand, as she confronted the plotting lover.

CHAPTER IX. A TEST OF FAITH.

"I" STAMMERED Pasteur, in seeming confusion, yet self-possessed enough to give a deft twist to her words. "What should I know about it? I have not been away from the ranch to-day."

"I am well aware of that," answered Lina. "Still I repeat my question. What do you know about Mr. Reardon's absence? You do know something about it. Your face has betrayed you."

If she could have seen his face clearly while she was speaking, it would have given her something to weigh.

"Does she know? Can she suspect?" he asked himself.

But her passive acceptance of his alteration, from what he had had to do with Jim's absence, to what he knew about it, reassured him.

"And I repeat," he said, "how is it possible for me to guess what accident—it must be an accident—"

But here he broke off, in apparent confusion.

"Let us wait," he concluded, lamely, "and— and hope for the best."

The girl stamped her foot with impatience and pain.

"You are not frank with me," she declared. "What has been the matter with you for the past week?"

"Can you ask?" he protested, in a low voice.

"No! no!" she cried, almost in tears. "You shall not put me off so! Why have you looked at Mr. Reardon, and at me, as you have for the past few days? I demand to know! I have a right to insist upon an explanation."

Suddenly he extended his hands toward her supplicatingly, and in a voice shaken with emotion pleaded:

"Don't ask me, Lina! Don't force me to tell you! Wait! wait! You will know soon enough; but let it be some one else—not me!"

What was it that he shrunk from telling her? He must know something, definitely. His tone, his words, indicated it.

"Speak! speak!" she commanded.

"Oh, Lina! oh, my darling!" he cried, passionately. "I don't know! I am only tormented by misgivings! Don't urge me! Wait! wait! It may be all right. A thousand things might have happened."

"What is it? What do you think?" she persisted.

He fell upon his knees before her.

"You will hate me forever!" he ejaculated.

"If my fears prove false, you will believe that I sought to poison your happiness, because—because I had lost you. If—true, you will only remember that I struck the blow. And I would have given my life to spare you pain, humiliation—"

"Humiliation?" she repeated after him, with a burst of indignation.

"I would have called him out, and shot him; but I was not sure. I hoped that it might come right in the end, after all. He might be trying to get out of a false position. I could not believe that he would—would—deliberately—"

But the words died on his lips.

Lina was now staring at him breathlessly.

What was he saying? What did his words imply? Jim trying to extricate himself from a false position? What false position?

"Oh, can't you see?" he cried, with a sudden outburst, as if the words were wrung from him by insupportable anguish—"can't you see that I have been tortured by doubts and fears till I can endure no more? Ah! how selfish I am! And yet, it is you I longed to spare! Do you suppose I love you only selfishly? Do you believe that I had no further care for your welfare because I could not possess you? Say the word, and I will kill him! The world is not wide enough for him to hide from my revenge! I ask no reward. Only believe in me—believe that I have thought of you first, last, and always!"

"Kill him?" she repeated, wonderingly. "What are you saying? Why should I say the word for you to harm my husband?"

"Your husband!" he cried, aghast. "Oh, is it possible that you do not see? He will never be your husband!"

"What? what?" she cried, sharply.

"Lina, you do not understand! The villain has—has—abandoned you!"

She stood breathless for a single instant, and then his words had an effect quite different from what he expected.

"Well," she said, quietly, "you must have lost your head! You have been looking through green spectacles with a vengeance. Whatever has happened to him, James Reardon will answer for himself before long. If he does not come soon, they will go out to look for him. I suppose it is his horse."

"Wait! wait! I swear to you! He has been meeting her clandestinely. I have seen her in his arms within forty-eight hours. Oh, Lina! that you should force me to tell you this!"

He bowed his face into his hands, seemingly overcome.

She went up to him with rapid strides, and seized him by the shoulders.

"Look up!" she cried, shaking him. "You have gone too far to stop. Speak out all the evil thoughts that are in your wicked heart, and I will repeat these slanders to Mr. Reardon, and have him punish you as you deserve!"

Her voice died away in sobs.

"Oh, my darling!" cried the arch hypocrite. "I have not known how to act. Should I stand mute and let this iniquity go on? You would be deceived all your life, or find it out when it was too late. If I denounced him, he would deny it, and get you all the same! What could I do?"

I waited. I don't know what I should have done, if he had stood beside you and sworn to love no one but you. But he will never do that now. Lina, my poor girl, he has gone—gone with her! I thought he might be deceiving her; but, either by threats, or by persuasion, she has induced him to redeem his pledge to her. He has sacrificed you. But, oh, my darling, is it not better so?—to be hurt, even like this, rather than be tied beyond recall to such a scoundrel?"

He extended his arms to her, in an appeal which, though unspoken, could have but one significance.

But, with a sharp cry of despair, she tore herself from his side, and fled away into the house. "Whah's dat boy, Clem?" came Mammy's voice, in querulous appeal. "I 'clar' to goodness! dat chile done bring he ole mammy in sorrier to de grave! Clem! O-o-oh, Clem!"

But Clem lay low, like a 'coon in a holler logg," as he said to himself.

In vain did Mammy mutter:

"I reckon, now, dat young scalawag done 'sconce hisse'f som'ers out byah, to git red o' dat dish-washin'. It don' make no diffe'ce 'bout my ole bones!"

She sighed in bitter resignation, as she waddled back into the kitchen.

Paul Pasteur stood perfectly still, lost in the shadows, while Mammy was peering about for Clem. Then he too went to the house, to continue the part he was playing.

"I's done gwine to bring Mars' Jim in!" declared Clem to himself, when he was free to act. "Dat 'ah dish-washin' ain't jest nuffin'. It's to circumbolilate dish-yah rapsalion dat I'm after. What he makin' up to Missy Lina fur? Nebbah hyeah sich lies as all dat! Missy Gay! Hugh!"

And Clem grunted with infinite contempt at the thought that Mars' Jim could think seriously of "dat 'ah Godwin gal, 'long o' Missy Lina!" Still, his actions proved that, secretly, he had misgivings.

Catching and mounting a horse, as readily in the darkness as in daylight, he made a bee-line for Godwin's Ranch.

As he neared it, he heard sounds that satisfied him of something unusual going on there.

Instantly dismounting, he crept toward the house, to discover that a squad of mounted men stood before it.

What could this mean? They were talking. A word overheard might enlighten him. Like a shadow he crept nearer and nearer, till—he suddenly found more than he had counted on.

He heard a low ejaculation of surprise, and the next instant a body was precipitated upon him as if falling from the clouds, and after a sharp struggle, he was made a captive—by Jack Godwin.

He had crept directly by a spot where Jack was standing motionless, concealed by the darkness.

The merest accident had made him a prisoner; and he was soon surrounded by the squad of men on whom he had sought to spy, and a moment later dragged into the presence of Sat-Godwin himself.

Never before had Clem seen such an expression on the ranchero's face, as now when he glowered down upon the captive inquiringly.

"Dish-yeah chile's a gone 'coon!" was Clem's reflection. "Wheddah dey kotch Mars' Jim or not, dey've got dis niggah-boy, sure!"

Meanwhile, anxiety was increasing at the Reardon Ranch. Lina struggled to keep up the appearance of unconcern; but it resulted only in hysterical gayety that finally became painful to witness.

Then this effort, in which she had been seconded by Father Reardon, was honestly abandoned; and it was openly declared that Jim must have met with some accident.

"No one dreamed of any other solution than this—no one save Paul Pasteur and his fluttering victim.

Lina saw a search party form and set out, and turned away sick at heart.

Mother Reardon would have put her arms about her, but she slipped away to her own room.

What she passed through there she could never afterward recall without a shudder. But from the torturing thoughts that haunted her like bats flitting in the ebon darkness of a cavern, she was sharply aroused by the thud of horses' hoofs approaching at a round gallop.

It could be none other than the party that had set out in quest of her lover. They had not been gone an hour. Of course, she reasoned, they would not be returning so soon if they had not found him.

A sharp reaction of feeling drove her almost

wild. She did not realize till then how she had accepted appearances against her lover.

Now, driven by remorse for her want of trust, triumph over Paul Pasteur's aspersions, and a thousand eddying emotions, she ran out to the horsemen, crying aloud:

"Jim! Jim! Jim!"

The riders drew up sharply. Some one, in a husky voice, said:

"My God!"

She took but a few steps further, before she realized that no lover responded to her call.

Then she too stopped, abruptly, pressing her hands upon her breast, as she leaned forward to peer into the darkness.

"Had they found him—dead? Why had they pulled up? Why did they shrink from meeting her?"

"Let me see him," she said, suddenly going forward—"living or—"

But the words died on her faltering lips. She was reeling, and would have fallen, but that Paul Pasteur sprang forward, and caught her.

His touch stung her into renewed consciousness. She tore herself from his supporting arm, and sprang forward into the midst of the party of horsemen, only to utter a sharp cry of amazement and terror at the first man she recognized.

The same piercing glance and wrathful frown that had sent cold shivers over Little Shoo-fly's body now transfixed her.

"Her father!" she aspirated under her breath; and the solid earth seemed suddenly slipping from beneath her feet.

CHAPTER X.

KIDNAPPED.

It was in the middle of the afternoon. Jim Reardon was returning in ample time for the ceremony that was to make him the happiest of men.

The business that had engaged him of late must have been concluded to his satisfaction, for he smiled well content as he jogged along.

"Yes," he said to himself, "every woman ought to have a home of her own. It's all very well to live with the old folks, or rather to have old folks live with you, after she has ruled the roost long enough so that there's no chance of any question as to her sole sway. But just at first, at any rate, she ought to have full swing. There's nothing in this world quite up to elbow-room, after all.

"But won't it be a surprise to her, though? I hope I haven't got things too much awry."

And he laughed at recollection of quandaries into which he had been plunged by questions as to the arrangement of furniture, etc.

It was a series of pretty pictures that he recalled, though, as he wandered in imagination again and again through the various rooms of as cozy a little house as any frontiersman's bride need wish to be taken home to.

It was furnished and provisioned, and ready in every respect for its new mistress.

Jim had planned a surprise as the conclusion of his wedding festivities.

After the marriage and the supper, he intended to announce to his guests that the evening's entertainment included their adjournment to a place which he had provided.

The horses and wagons were to be in readiness, and the whole party to be taken to the new home without knowing what they were going to.

Even his mother and father did not know of his arrangements.

He would install his bride, and then announce that what she saw about her was her own.

Jim was enaored to raise this house as by the flourish of a wizard's wand, by pledging several of his most trusted men to secrecy.

And now the last touch was completed, and Jim, a happy man if ever there was one, was going to the woman for whom he had labored in love.

He was passing through the very woods in which, three weeks before, we first saw him and Lina.

He recalled that moment, and then what had followed, and a flush of humiliation overspread his bronzed cheek.

"But it turned out all right, thank God!" he said. "Less than that has cost many an unlucky dog his happiness. What should I have done if Lina— But, there! I'm going to have none but happy thoughts to-day."

If he could but have known!

At a little distance off his path a horse was secreted in a gully, while close beside the trail crouched a man with his face hidden from view behind a mask of black cloth.

On an eminence which commanded the trail

where it crossed an open glade, a good mile away, stood another with the outward semblance of a man.

Masked like the man lying in ambush, this personage gazed intently at the glade across which no one could pass undetected.

But there were peculiarities in the set of the rough garments, and above all in the movements of the wearer, by which a critical eye would have discovered that this was a woman.

Not to make a needless mystery of the matter, it was Gay Godwin in disguise.

Her colleague was a man whose rascality was equaled only by his fidelity. It was his boast that he never "shook" a friend, and he probably laid the more stress on this, as it was his one virtue.

The tireless vigil of the girl was harassed by gusts of stormy passion, and the chill of uncertainty.

"It is my one desperate hope!" she said to herself. "And how many chances are against me! He may not come this way. There is no reason why he should not; yet he may not, if only to spite me! Then Judson may fail. If we are discovered, all will be lost. Jud has been drinking, though I especially commanded him not to. Of course he is always more or less drunk. He pleaded that it would shake his nerve, not to have his regular allowance. Then, if we take him, the—the—she may fail to act as we want her to. I could shake the life out of her!"

The ending was vicious enough, in all conscience.

When she thought of Lina, Gay could not keep still. She began to walk back and forth, at the risk of having the man for whom she was on the watch slip across the glade unobserved.

"He must carry her off, whether she agrees to marry him or not," she continued. "He has sworn to do it. So long as he takes her out of the way, and keeps her out, that's all I ask of him. He can marry her, or go love-lorn, for all me."

But, returning to her lookout, she suddenly struck her hands together, with a sharp cry.

"Thar! thar! he's coming!"

For a moment she stood quite dazed. She looked again and again, to assure herself that there could be no mistake.

Then she ran, mounted hastily, and rode at breakneck speed down the mountain to where Judson awaited her.

"He is coming! he is coming!" she repeated, breathlessly, as, her horse secreted by his, she sought the side of her confederate.

"Waal," said Judson, unconcernedly, "cool off, or you'll knock the hull thing gally-west."

"You are all ready?"

"I've had lots o' time to git ready in."

"You will make sure with your throw?"

"Thar ain't no reason why I shouldn't. Cool off! cool off!"

"I shall never be cool again!"

"Waal," muttered Judson, under his breath, "I'm blame glad I hain't got no woman critter after me!"

To Gay he said:

"You go git in your own place, an' leave me to myself. I onderstand my business."

He busied himself recoiling a long lariat of horse-hair, balancing it carefully in his hand.

Satisfied, he then crouched behind a thicket, quite close to the trail, yet out of sight of any one passing.

Behind him, the lariat was fastened to a fallen tree-trunk.

Seeing all here in readiness, Gay slipped across the trail to the other side, and was lost to view.

So still lay these watchers, that all the sights and sounds of nature were resumed. The birds began to flit about, the squirrels ran hither and thither, as if no intruders were near.

Then came the sound of hoof-beats. So Jim Reardon, all unsuspecting, rode into the trap.

He had passed, when Jud arose silently, as silently whirled his lariat about his head, and sent it stringing out like a striking serpent.

Jim saw only a dark line flit before his vision, heard the hurtle of the lasso, and felt its bight close about his arms, between the shoulder and elbow.

At the same instant, a ringing yell close in his rear, the rush of some one from the bushes, and a blow with a leaf-covered branch, frightened his horse so that he leaped from under his master.

Jim turned his head just enough to see the masked ruffian who had thrown the lasso, and then he struck the ground with a concussion that made him see a million stars.

To make sure that he be stunned, Judson sprang upon him and struck him on the head

with a club which he had in readiness, without having consulted Gay.

Amazed, frightened and infuriated by this barbarity, the girl sprung forward to seize the cudgel before it could descend again.

She had struck the blow that had cost Jim his seat in the saddle; but it was because the whole success of her plot depended upon so much.

"Ah! you murderer!" she cried. "Do you mean to brain him?"

"I mean to fix him so he wouldn't drop to your leetle racket, my lady; an' I done it," answered Jud, unconcernedly.

"You have killed him!" wailed the girl, kneeling, and taking Jim's head in her arms.

Jud had done his work skillfully. She had nothing now to fear so far as recognition went.

She drew the black cloth from before her face, and pillowing Jim's head on her bosom, kissed his unresponsive lips.

"Oh, my darling!" she murmured. "It is because I love you."

Her tears fell upon his face. Her lips sought forgiveness at his. He neither heeded nor knew of these evidences of her wild passion.

"Ah! he will never return caress of mine!" she sighed, her heart full of bitterness even at the moment of her triumph.

"I reckon we'd better be movin'," suggested Jud, dryly.

"Go get his horse," answered Gay, coldly.

He went, finding that the beast had stopped of his own accord after a brief run, and was cropping the bunch-grass with no thought of his master.

Alone with the man she loved so madly, Gay gave a free rein to her stormy passion. Assailed by a fierce jealousy, as if his unconsciousness were a spell that her rival had cast over him, she sought in every way to woo him back to consciousness, for the moment defying the consequences of so rash an act.

"He must see how I love him, and come back to me!" she cried, knowing the folly of such a hope. "He can't be dead to everything."

Luck aided her scheme, Jud returned before she had succeeded in her mad purpose.

"Waal," he said, in a tone of deep disgust, "ef that's your leetle game, count me out. I'll slope before he comes round. Jest give me twenty minutes start."

This brought Gay to her senses.

"Finish!" she cried. "You might as well take the things now."

Taking her at her word, Jud bent down, and coolly and scientifically relieved Jim of all of his available property.

When he recovered consciousness, it would look as if he had been waylaid and robbed, this being one of the devices by which Gay hoped to hide her true agency in the matter.

"Now," he said, as he arose, "thar ain't no use o' takin' no chances. We'd better fix him fur good while we're about it."

"You have nearly fixed him for good, as it is," retorted Gay, bitterly.

"Ef I was so squeamish as you, I reckon thar wouldn't be nothin' done. However, suit yerself. You've got more up on this transaction than I have."

The girl hesitated, and then slowly drew a vial from her bosom.

"Be careful!" she cautioned. "After that blow, you may kill him. If you do, I'll be the death of you, as sure as you're a living man!"

She made this threat so savagely, that Jud, as he took the vial from her, reflected:

"I reckon she'd be as good as her word. But, sho! thar ain't no danger."

He knelt again, and drop by drop administered some of the contents of the vial, till Gay suddenly demanded that he give no more.

"I won't have it!" she cried. "If he comes to, let him!"

"He won't come to—not before we're ready fur him," answered Jud, coolly.

"No thanks to you if he ever comes to!" retorted the girl.

Kneeling, she gathered the limp body in her arms, and by a mighty effort lifted it till she put it astride in the saddle.

"I've done it!" she cried triumphantly, as she stood steadying the body and gasping for breath.

"It would be all right, ef that was all thar was to it!" replied Jud. "But it'll be an awful stretcher, ef you git it down him bull."

"I'll show you!" she answered with determination.

With Jim's own lariat she bound him in his saddle, so that he would not roll off.

Then she mounted her own horse, and keeping it close to that of the man she was kidnapping

in such desperate fashion, rode back over the trail, and away over the prairie in a direction widely different from that which Jim would have taken if he had had anything to say in the matter.

"Let her wait for him!" she muttered, with a savage chuckle of triumph. "Now, if that milk-and-water chap from the East plays his part, we'll be shut of her before many days."

An hour later Jud, dressed in Jim Reardon's clothes, was awaiting the coach to Saddler's Crossing.

CHAPTER XI.

A NEW KIND OF ROAD AGENT.

"NARVOUS, be ye?" asked Hank Toplofty, with a grin and a sidelong glance that measured the figure of the "pilgrim" who sat beside him on the box.

"Well, I don't know," was the reflective answer. "I have never been under the fire of such gentry."

"Waal, stranger, you've got one vartue, at any rate, what ain't layin' around loose, as a general thing."

"Ah?"

"You don't lie an' brag so oudacious at most. Now, ef thar's ary thing on top o' this hyar airth what I do despise, it's a lyin' blow-hard."

The traveler replied only with a low laugh.

"A tenderfoot," proceeded Hank, oracularly, "is, as a rule, a born gas-bag. They're all goin' fur to take in Mr. Road-agent, body an' breeches—till Mr. Road-agent shows up. Then Mr. Gas-bag caves—he does so—an' caves bad."

"But aren't these pretty desperate fellows?"

"The tenderfeet? By ther bazco—"

"The road-agents?"

"Oh, them galoots! Waal, that jest depends. They've had the gali knocked out of 'em along this hyar line. They gits to know their man."

Mr. Toplofty said this in so quiet and matter-of-fact a way, as to leave one almost in doubt whether it contained a modest allusion to himself.

To test the question, the traveler ventured:

"You have had encounters with them, then?"

"I?" exclaimed Mr. Toplofty, with the rising inflection of surprise—"on this rout? 'M, no—nothin' to speak of. A year ago, or sich a matter, they chipped in oncet or twicet; but it didn't pay—it didn't pay!"

Hank shook his head slowly as if half-regretting the fate of the road-agents who had "chipped in oncet or twicet." The inference naturally drawn was, that they had "passed in" their chips.

"But thar was the San Moreno road," he resumed, brightening after a moment's reflection. "Ef you dote on fun, you'd orter dropped in on us thar. It war five year ago, when the country war wild. That was the time we old heads l'art our 'prenticeship. But them old times has gone up the spout, never to show up ag'in!"

Hank sighed, as if the zest and savor of life had departed with the old days.

"But you can live them over again in story," suggested the stranger. "I suppose you have had many an interesting adventure."

"H'm, waal, I don't like no man to be always chin-choppin' about number one. I don't do much of it myself. But, then, oncet in a while a gent like you comes along, an' nothin' won't do him but to set us old 'uns gassin'."

"Waal, I dunno," scratching his head, as if it were a task to recall little incidents that were of so slight importance as to quite easily drop out of mind. "Ye see, I've got Injun blood in me; so I takes to it naterally."

The stranger regarded the stage-driver with a look of expectant interest. At the same time he took the liberty to quietly set this last statement down as a lie out of whole cloth. There was no trace of the red-man in Hank Toplofty.

"I takes to it naterally," repeated Hank, bobbing his head several times. "I says to the boys—Gents, says I, thar ain't no use o' makin' no two bites o' this hyar thing. It's dog eat dog, an' the galoot as gits in the fu'st lick is comin' out ahead—you hyear me! Ef we don't knock 'em out—an' blame quick, too—they're naterally goin' fur to git away with us."

"I hain't got no use fur no b'ar," says Jake Fesner—an' Jake he was as big as a mounting. 'The comp'ny don't pay us fur no fightin',' says he, 'an' I'd a blamed sight druther have a hole in somebody else's pocket than in my hide—I would so!'"

"But I says, ef I was goin' to run a rout', it had got to be run right, ef I had to bolt every blame road-agent in that thar section o' country."

"Jake he 'lowed when a few o' 'em had

mounted me; I'd sicken; but I told him to wait. Waal, sir—"

But just on the threshold of his exploits, Mr. Hank Toplofty was arrested by an incident that made his jaw drop and his eyes bulge, while he pulled up his horses with a yank.

"Hold on, pard!" he ejaculated, in a pleading voice. "I ain't no hog, an' that's a fact. This hyar ain't none o' my funeral. You know that without my tellin' of ye. Every sport plays his own hand, an' I pass out!"

Giving the lines a turn around the brake-handle, he rose in his place, and lifted his hands above his head.

All this was done without a word of command.

In turning a sharp bend in the road, in the midst of a thicket that hid what lay beyond, he had unexpectedly come upon a man standing in the middle of the road, with a carbine held at his shoulder.

It must be confessed, in extenuation of Mr. Toplofty's prompt action, and to shield him from the charge of cowardice, that from where he sat he could look directly down the bore of the gun. If he did not see the conical point of the bullet, it was only for want of light in the narrow chamber of the weapon.

Moreover, this silent challenger was masked with a piece of black coat-lining tied across his face, supplied with only eyeholes. It was impossible to tell whether he wore a beard, or even what was the color of his hair.

It was plain that he was exceedingly careful in guarding his identity, for he was cautious not to betray himself by his voice.

As to figure, that might be padded, so as to be no guide. A man could not make himself smaller than he was by nature, but there was no reasonable limit in the other direction.

"Boss," said Hank to the stranger, who sat looking on with no little surprise, "you foller my lead, you do. I know what I'm talkin' about, an' I say cave!"

"That means, I suppose, that the rule of five years ago and the San Moreno road don't apply to the present case?" observed the stranger, with a sarcastic smile.

"You're a tenderfoot, pardner. You don't understand these things," declared Hank, unblushingly. "I'll give you the points between deals. This time hain't no time fur talk."

"It strikes me as a time for action."

"All right! You plays yer own hand. Mebbe you'll find shin-plasters good salve fur bullet-holes. I've seen the thing tried in my time. It never worked, though, to my notion. Excuse me ef I don't stop to assist."

Then addressing the road-agent:

"Hold on, pard. Before you open up on this gent, leave me a show to git out o' range. I'll jump down, ef you please."

And he leaped from his place to the ground.

Instead of opening fire on the tenderfoot, the road-agent beckoned to Mr. Toplofty to advance.

"All right! all right!" said Hank, with ready compliance.

But what was his amazement, on approaching the outlaw, to see him drop the butt of his gun to the ground, and after a little fumbling, produce a letter, which he held out for Mr. Toplofty's acceptance.

"Waal, I sw'ar!" ejaculated Hank. "Hyar's a queer go, fur a fact! What he I to do with this hyar?"

The robber, who added to, instead of deducting from, the possessions of his victim, answered nothing in words, but waved Mr. Toplofty back to his place on the box, and then stepped to the side of the road, again holding his weapon in readiness, as if to intimate that he wished the coach to proceed without any impertinent investigation.

As he walked back, Hank turned the letter over and over in his hand, viewing it from all sides, as if to resolve the mystery of its strange delivery.

He learned nothing save that it was directed to Sat Godwin, and bore the ordinary postage stamp.

"Waal, I sw'ar!" he ejaculated again, and then, with a feeling of some sheepishness: "Blank that infernal tenderfoot, anyway!"

However, when he reached the coach, and mounted with his wonted swing, he was smiling knowingly.

He rolled his quid jovially into the over cheek, canted his head on one side, and continued his amused grin, as he cracked his long whip, and went by the strange road-agent at a spanking gallop.

"Ta! ta! pard," he said, with a friendly wave of his whip, as he passed the silent outlaw.

For perhaps a quarter of a mile he chuckled softly to himself, and then turning to his companion, said:

"Waal, boss you've got sand, too."

"As well as general truthfulness?"

"Haw! haw! haw! Waal, now, what did you think o' that thar, fur a fact?"

"I thought it looked a great deal as if we were about to lose our money—that is to say, if we didn't get in the first lick!"

"Let up on that, stranger! You hain't got me thar. I knowed thar wa'n't no road-agints on this hyar road. They wouldn't pay their salt. An' road-agint business is run fur money, every time. It was only one o' the boys on a lark. But I reckoned it was a good show fur to try your narve. You bet, ef it had been a ginooine Johnny Hold-up, I wouldn't 'a' done no jumpin' off'n no coach. He'd 'a' pinked me on the fly!"

Hank recovered very gracefully, and his actions had been such as to make it look as if he had jumped down in anticipation of the letter he had received; but recalling his sudden pallor and the quaver in his voice, the stranger concluded that he was only throwing dust in his eyes.

"Well," he said, smiling quietly, with half-closed eyes, "I have had the pleasure of a scare, and it cost me nothing. What could I ask better than that? I shall remember this adventure with a great deal of—of—amusement."

"Blank him!" said Hank, internally.

However, he could not give audible expression to his feelings without betraying more than he cared to. He kept a stiff upper lip, and made the best of a trying situation.

It was noticeable that he did not recur to his adventures on the San Moreno road, and the stranger forbore pressing the matter.

Arriving at Saddler's Crossing, he gave in this letter while delivering his mail-bags, saying nothing as to how he had come by it.

It was further noticeable that he did not manifest his wonted sociability, declaring that he purposed to put in his spare time in a "snooze." And he went off to bed with only one drink.

But the stranger held no such reserve. He told the incident, carefully abstaining, however, from any reflection upon Mr. Toplofty.

"I suppose that's your way of doing things out here?" he observed, in conclusion.

"The deuce it is!" cried Pop Saddler, fumbling nervously about for his iron-bowed spectacles. "Not ef the court knows herself, an' we 'low she does. I never hyear o' nothin' o' this hyar style before. What's the matter o' Hank, as he didn't let on?"

"He thought it a lark of one of the boys."

"Lark be blowed!"

And Pop scanned the letter with a frown that made his eyes glare large and round through his glasses.

"What's this hyar, boys?" he cried, appealing to the crowd of loungers, who were gratifying their curiosity by running over the mail matter that had been thrown indiscriminately into the soap-box on the end of the counter, next the cheese.

Everybody looked, but nobody could offer any suggestion.

The stranger was requested to go over the story again, and go slow. He was put under a crossfire of questions from whomever the spirit moved. But the end was as the beginning.

"Waal, this hyar thing don't rest in this hyar shape!" declared Pop, with the hen-like fussiness of a curious old woman.

And he marched off to Hank Toplofty's room, and pounded a thundering summons on the door.

"What in Cain's the row with you?" shouted Hank, irritably.

"What in Cain's the row with this hyar letter?" mimicked Pop Saddler.

"To thunder with the letter!" growled Hank.

"I don't know nothin' about it."

And that was all that could be got out of him.

"Boys," said Pop, with a look which was a universal appeal for sympathy, "this hyar letter is of vast importance. It shouldn't order lay in this hyar office no four or five days. Tell some o' Sat Godwin's crowd comes to town."

"Four or five days?—Sat?" scoffed one of the bystanders. "Whar's his whisky all this time?"

Pop was not disposed to argue the matter.

"Who's goin' that thar way? He'd orter git it to-night—as quick as we kin git it to him. Laffer, you've got a boss what's like to git off his feed fur want of exercise."

"Pd jest as leave take the letter, ef you say so."

"You're my man! Come, boys!—let's have somethin' as a starter; an' good luck to—"

But it would have been unfairly partial to limit his good wishes to Laffer, for there were

half a dozen more quite as anxious to be obliging.

"You kin all go," was Pop's decision among them. "An' git back word as soon as you kin. I wish I was younger myself—"

"An' weighed a trifle under sixteen stone," laughed a young fellow, who secretly prided himself on his own proportions.

So it came about that while Sat Godwin was yet picking his teeth after supper, his house was besieged by a band of amateur letter-carriers, who drew no stipend from the national coffers.

Sat had been sitting in gloomy anxiety. At sight of the superscription on the envelope, eager eyes noted that he turned pale.

"I'm obleeged to you, gents," he said, when he had heard the strange manner of delivery. "I'll go in an' git my specks, while Jack, hyar, shows you whar we keep a mite o' somethin' cheerin' to the inner man."

He read his letter alone, where no one could note the changing expression of his countenance.

As he read, a deep purple overspread his face; then it waned until he was gray with pallor, and a white circle settled about his pinched lips.

"Gents," he said, quietly, coming forth again, "I reckon I'll go back to the Crossin' with ye."

But at this moment the sounds of a furious scuffle came from a little distance.

Those nearest ran to see what was going on. As they crowded around, Jack's voice was heard, saying, as he panted for breath:

"Keep yer hands off, gents! I've got him! He's a reg'lar eel fur squirmen'; but, fish, flesh, or fowl, he's my meat! Come up hyar, you leetle monkey, an' let's look ye over. Waal, blast my eyes, ef it ain't Reardon's little ducky! What in Cain be you snoopin' around hyar fur?"

"What's that?" cried Sat Godwin, in a tone that made Little Shoo-fly's heart quail.

He was dragged forward, spluttering:

"Look hyeah! look hyeah! look hyeah! What you doin' wid me? I ain't doin' nuffin' wid you."

But he became suddenly quiet when Sat Godwin fastened a heavy grip on his shoulder and gazed with gloomy menace down into his eyes.

CHAPTER XII.

A PLAIN-SPOKEN MAN.

"REARDON'S ducky!" said Sat Godwin, repeating his son's announcement. "H'm! h'm!"

For a moment he stood gazing reflectively into Clem's eyes, and then said, abruptly:

"Come in hyar. I'll have a word alone with you."

With a force that Clem felt was irresistible, he was marched into the house, and the door closed.

Alone with his captive, Sat Godwin, without loosing his grip, sat down, holding the boy at his knee.

"Now, don't you be skeered o' me," he began, when Clem interrupted him with a swagger that was ludicrous under the circumstances.

"Skeered?" he cried. "Who's skeered? I ain't skeered o' nuffin'. I b'long to Mars' Jim, I does, an' de man what puts de weight of his hand on me is callin' Mars' Jim loud!"

"Whar is Jim Reardon?" asked Sat, so abruptly as to take Clem off his guard.

"Dat's what I'd like to know," he blurted out.

"What!" exclaimed Sat, picking him up so sharply that, as the saying is, it "made his head swim."

"Did you come prowlin' around hyar fur to find him?"

"Eh! I—ah—dat ain't what I said."

"None o' yer lyin', you young monkey! You came hyar fur him. Then he ain't to home. Whar is he, eh? Who sent you hyar? Ain't that weddin' done an' over with yet?"

But Clem, seeing that he had "put his foot in it," determined at least not to make matters any worse.

He shut up like an oyster, his resolute face showing that he was ready for martyrdom, if it was unavoidable, but not for a betrayal of his master.

"I reckon you had better put dese lyeah interrogatories to Mars' Jim hisse'f," he said, with an assumption of great dignity.

"You won't speak, eh?" asked Sat, grimly.

"Not dis ebenin'!" declared Clem, sarcastically.

"Waal, maybe we kin git along without," said Sat, after a moment's reflection.

He arose, and led Clem back out of doors.

Before the men from Saddler's Crossing had come with their mysterious missive, Jack Godwin had shared in the family anxiety.

Notwithstanding his cavalier way with his sister, he was very sensitive where she was con-

cerned; and feeling the inquisitive eyes of the men upon him, he had gone off by himself, to toss his hair impatiently off his throbbing temples, and think how he ought to act in this emergency.

So it happened that he had been standing a little apart, where he discovered the creeping Clem before he himself was discovered.

On the appearance of his father with the announcement that he intended to go to the Crossing, Jack noticed that the old man held his favorite rifle.

Feeling that something ominous was impending, Jack took advantage of his father's interview with Clem to secure his weapon.

Just as he was leaving the house, he found himself detained by his mother's trembling hands.

Nothing had been said to Mrs. Godwin. She had sought her husband's eyes, to discover what he was thinking about; but all the evening he had carefully avoided her glance.

Now as she clung to her son, she whispered in his ear:—

"Don't let him hurt her, Jack!—don't let him hurt her none!"

The boy drew a deep breath, and his eyes glowed with an unwonted brilliancy, but he answered not a word.

So they rode away, with little Shoo-fly a prisoner.

The mother was left alone with her grief and her anxiety.

Where was her willful girl to-night?

The ride back to Saddler's Crossing was almost wordless. Sat Godwin, usually the life of any party, was now locked in grim silence; and the men, wondering what might be in that mysterious letter to move him, and what was to be the upshot of it all, yielded to the depressing effect of his gloom.

Pop Saddler, on the lookout with eager curiosity, hailed him on his approach.

"Waal, I swar! you've brung him back with ye to speak fur himself. What's all this hyar funny business about, Sat? You hain't stood in with no road-agint, hev ye? Ho! ho! ho!"

But Pop's humor met with no appreciation.

"Whar's Hank Toplofty?" demanded Sat, so severely that Pop became serious at once.

"He's gone to roost. Turned the minute he was off the box. That looks quare too."

"Whar's his room?" was Sat's next demand.

"Twenty-seven, on the left, in the L."

Sat strode down the passage with doors on either side, no one presuming to follow him.

Even Jack held back, standing in gloomy depression, yet furtively watching the faces of the men about him.

He felt that his presence was a restraint upon them. But for him, it was plain that they would have fallen to a lively discussion of the mystery.

"What's the racket?" whispered Pop Saddler, drawing one apart. "He's fotched his gun. He means business."

But no one could enlighten him. All were compelled to await developments.

Sat meanwhile was pounding on Hank Toplofty's door.

"At it ag'in?" shouted the stage-driver, as he turned over in his straw litter. "Why, blast yer two eyes into one, how do you reckon I'm to git ary bit o' sleep with you raisin' Cain at my door all night?"

The fact was, he had not slept, nor was he sleepy. He did not know just how much the stranger had told, and he wanted to escape quizzing till the thing had blown over.

"Hank," said Sat, through the door, "I've come fur a word with you."

"Who's hyar?" demanded the stage-driver, Sat's voice being so hoarse that he did not recognize it.

"It's me—Sat Godwin."

Muttering with sullen discontent, Hank turned out of bed, and opened the door.

"I don't see what I kin do fur ye," was his ungracious welcome. "Cut it as short as you conveniently kin."

Sat went in and drew the door to after him.

Then he deliberately stepped into Hank's bunk, and looked over the half-partitions, first on one side of the cell-like apartment, and then on the other.

Satisfied that there was no one near to overhear him, he sat down on the edge of the bunk, and began:

"The boys give me a mighty queer story about how you come by this letter. Suppose you go over it, an' give it to me straight?"

Hank told of his meeting the strange outlaw circumstantially, though with an ill grace.

"What-fur lookin' man was this hyar?" asked Sat, glancing up from under his overhanging

brows like a dozing dog keeping guard over a bone held under his paw.

"Waal, he was about like the rest, I reckon. I couldn't make him out much."

"Was he as big as me, or you, or Jim Reardon, or Pop Saddler?"

"Waal, he wa'n't your build, or mine; an' you bet he wa'n't ole Pop's. Now you speak of it, he might strip to Jim Reardon's weight. He might be a trifle heavier, or maybe a trifle lighter, but the two of 'em 'u'd make a team fur hight—my money says so. An'—waal, that's a fact, he wa'n't fur off from the same style o' man as Jim—fur togs, I mean. He wa'n't no slouch."

"Ah!" muttered Sat, in a sort of dull growl. "what-fur lookin' togs might he have on? Maybe you kin give me a pint or two on that same."

Hank scratched his head, and scowled impatiently.

However, he managed to give a pretty fair description of the road-agent as he had appeared to him.

"Hank, I want you to git into your breeches, an' come along o' me!" announced Sat, with a positiveness that was almost a command.

"Eh! What? Whar to?" demanded Toplofty, in astonishment.

"To Reardon's Ranch."

"Oh, gammon! You don't 'low as that might be Jim Reardon? I said he was o' his build. But I'd 'a' knowed Jim Reardon with my eyes shut."

"Ef he hadn't kep' his mouth shut!" amended Godwin. "Howsomever, that's neither hyar nor thar. I'm on business, an' ef your time is worth money, I kin afford to pay for it as well as the next man."

"Money be blowed!" growled Hank, who was too thorough a democrat to take pay for a neighborly turn. "That ain't the question. But, you hyear me!—ef Jim Reardon had had any letter fur you, he'd 'a' fired it into your teeth, 'stid o' goin' sneakin' around in this hyar way."

"That's all right," replied Sat, doggedly. "Ef you say you won't go—"

"Who said I wouldn't go? But it's a doggone fool errand, an' I know it. Why, look a-hyar!—Jim Reardon'd orter be gittin' married jest about now."

"Then we'll be in time fur the weddin'," responded Sat. "So much the better fur him ef he's gittin' married."

Surprise and curiosity were at their hight when it was seen that Hank Toplofty had been "routed" out of bed, while Sat Godwin was asking after the other man who had seen the road agent.

He was readily found, as smiling and serene as ever.

"I reckon, now, you mightn't be able to spot the gent, ef you was to see him in a different outfit?" asked Sat, hesitatingly. "A man shakes his togs mighty easy; an' then you didn't see his head much to speak of."

"It would be a little doubtful, judging by his size, but then I might notice something—something that I might not think of without seeing the man."

"Will you go along, an' do what you kin fur me?"

"Willingly."

So they set out. Every one who cared to, accompanied them.

They met the party that had been sent out in quest of Jim, and caused them to turn back.

"Gentlemen," said Sat Godwin, "thar ain't no manner o' use huntin' Jim Reardon in that thar direction. We've jest been over the road twict."

As they rode along, Little Shoo-fly sought a chance to slip away, outside the party, and give warning of their approach.

But Jack, in whose charge he had been placed, had stuck to him like a burr from the outset, and now, divining his purpose, he said:

"Look a-hyar, kid!—I'm jest achin' fur an excuse to hurt you, I am so! Jest give me a show, an' I'll bore you as sure as you live!"

"When you wind your bazoo, you make me wish't I was bawn deaf," retorted Little Shoo-fly. "When you git ready to let off you' leetle gun, you gib eberybody wawnin' to stan from undah. G'way, boy! I hain't got no use fur you."

But he saw that Jack was wide awake, and there was no use in trying to give him the slip.

So it happened that Lina rushed into this party, recognizing Sat the first of all.

She realized that Jim could not be there, and her first impulse was to turn and flee back to the house.

But then came the thought that she ought to

stay and learn the business of these men; and calling all her pride to her aid, she recovered her outward composure, and walked quietly back, and took her stand at the side of Father Reardon, holding his hand for support.

Nothing in his face showed the assurance of sympathy which the old man conveyed to her by a pressure of the hand, as, surrounded by his wondering guests, he received Sat Godwin, backed by his men, as some sturdy old baron of the bygone might have received a warlike neighbor.

Godwin would not enter the house, but sat his horse before the threshold.

"I'm a plain-spoken man," he began, grimly. "I always say wnat I mean, an' mean what I say; an' wind I do de-spise."

With this introduction, he drew forth the letter he had received so strangely, and tendered it to Mr. Reardon.

The old man received it with a hand that trembled visibly. But yet he was self-possessed enough to read Lina's burning eyes, under cover of a fumbling search for his spectacles.

"Read this to me, my dear," he said, finally handing her the letter. "Your eyes are younger than mine."

And, with her heart in her throat, the girl took it as if to devour it at a glance.

"Dat boy, Clem" had taken his position near her, and waited with eyes, ears, and mouth gaping wide.

Paul Pasteur was not far distant, yet retired, with an appropriate expression on his face, should Lina chance to glance at him. But within he was fairly chuckling.

"It is working like a charm! The whole community is working for me!"

Old Mrs. Reardon stepped to Lina's other side, and put a sustaining arm about her.

"Wait!" commanded Sat Godwin, just as the girl was about to draw the letter from its envelope.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BIRD FLUTTERS INTO THE SNARE.

"BEFORE you read that letter," said Sat Godwin, "it's only fair that you should know how I come by it."

With that, he told of the mysterious masker, concluding:

"Now, drive ahead with yer rat-killin'."

In faltering tones, Lina read aloud:

"DEAR POP AND MOM:—This is to let you know that you ain't to worry about me, if I don't show up for a few days. I know what I'm about, and I'm all right. Understand, you ain't to put nobody on my track, no matter what you hyear. I'm running this to suit myself. You stay home, and let folks talk, if they want to. I'll come out of this all right, or I won't come at all."

"Pop, I hope you won't let Ma take on. And say to Jack, if he puts in his oar, he'll git hurt. I know what I want, and I won't stand no foolishness from him. Your loving daughter, GABRIELLA."

A dead silence followed the reading of this communication.

Having struggled through the articulation of the name with a shudder of repulsion, Lina looked about in helpless appeal on the faces that were all bent staringly upon her.

Paul Pasteur alone stood with eyes bent on the ground.

"But what is all this to me?" asked Mr. Reardon, extending the letter to Sat.

"Maybe nothin'," replied Sat, "maybe a good deal. It all depends. As I said before, I'm a plain-spoken man. I always say what I mean, an' mean what I say. That letter's all right as fur as it goes, but it don't suit me. Do you reckon I'll let my girl walk out o' the house in this hyar shape, an' me take it easy till she has the notion to come back? Would you do the same by yours—ef you had one?" he added, with an afterthought.

"But what have I to do with your daughter?" cried Father Reardon, stoutly, though his heart was failing.

"That jest depends," repeated Sat, doggedly.

"Whar's Jim? I've sot out to see him."

"He isn't hyere."

"He ain't, eh? He'd orter be. Seems to me he had a weddin' on hand jest about this hyar time."

"That's all true enough. But he's gone to the Crossing, and has been prevented from getting back on time by some accident, I suppose."

"Hum! Very likely! Waal, hyar's Hank Toplofty as says he got this hyar writin' from a man of Jim Reardon's style."

"But it couldn't have been Jim. According to your own account, the fellow was masked."

"So he was. I wish't I'd 'a' seen him. I'd 'a' masked him! Howsomever, that ain't nuther hyar nor thar. I have mighty good reason fur believin' that Jim Reardon is at the bottom o' this hyar business, an' I end as I begun—I'm a plain-spoken man; I always say what I mean, an' mean what I say. An' this hyar's what I say now:

"Ef Jim Reardon has done the squar' thing by my girl—married her, all accordin' to Gunter—I'm agreeable. I hain't nothin' ag'in' Jim. But ef he's been a-playin' of her, fast an' loose, I'm out a-gunnin' fur him! You byear me!"

As Sat finished, he shook his rifle above his head in a savage menace.

In the silence that followed this threat, Father Reardon felt Lina lean heavily against him, as if her strength were failing her.

The thought of her suffering fired him with wrath.

"You're makin' a fool of yourself, Sat Godwin!" he cried. "Jim hasn't got any more to do with your girl than I have. Wasn't he to be married hyar to-night to somebody else; an' couldn't he speak his own mind? He could 'a' had your girl for the askin'. Everybody knows that. Why didn't he take her, then, if he wanted her?"

"But, no! that ain't what you're up to. It's war you want; and you've come to jest the right place to git your fill. You set out a-gunnin' for Jim Reardon jest whenever you think you're ready; but my advice to you is, git weighed before you start!"

The old man might be beaten in the argument, but when it came to action, he was game to the backbone!

"What I'm after," answered Sat, ignoring the challenge, "is to see my girl righted. I understand that's been a house built some'r's, an' fitted out fur housekeepin', all on the sly. Now, I'm goin' to that thar house, to see who's a-livin' thar. Ef you've a mind to go along, you're welcome. As I said before, I hain't nothin' ag'in' Jim or any of his folks, ef the thing's all squar'."

"A house?" repeated Father Reardon, in surprise.

"By this same Jim. Don't you know what your own boy's up to?"

"I'll go along," answered Mr. Reardon, simply.

"And I!" cried Lina, suddenly straightening up, with blazing eyes.

Mrs. Reardon would have restrained her, but the excited girl thrust her detaining arms away, and fled precipitately to her room.

How she got out of her wedding-dress, she never knew. It was a wreck, however.

Long before any one could have expected it, she reappeared, dressed for the saddle.

She found her horse in readiness. Without orders, Little Shoo-fly had prepared the mount, as also one for himself.

Every man about the ranch, Reardon's hands and his guests, went at his back, bound to see that he had fair play, if it came to an encounter with Sat Godwin.

Lina rode beside the old man who was already her father in feeling, if not in reality, with Little Shoo-fly just behind her.

The boy's eyes were round with excitement, and on his face was a look of resolve that his elders could not have surpassed.

Paul Pasteur, instead of pressing himself upon Lina's attention, rode in the crowd where she did not see him. Neither did she think of him in that trying moment.

Her heart was a scene of furious tumult. Her one thought was to look with her own eyes on the evidences of Jim's betrayal. After that she saw nothing.

In the darkness her face was invisible. How Father Reardon's heart would have sunk if he had seen its desperate expression.

"Don't you take on, deary!" he whispered to her. "It'll all come out right in the end. Jim ain't such a fool as to eat chicken when he can git duck!"

They found the house which Jim had built on as fine a site as was ever crowned by a happy home. It stood on a natural lawn, which sloped evenly down to a stream, that here fell in cascades over piled bowlders, and there lay in deep, shadowed pools, a still retreat for shy fish.

All about it the cottonwoods reared their majestic domes of foliage, forming vistas to where the prairie lay a treeless expanse to the horizon.

The house was such a one as made the rancheros stare. Nowhere had they seen such comfort and beauty, combined with simplicity scarcely less severe than in their own homes.

The sight—and she took it all in, with a

woman's eye—brought Lina's heart into her throat.

If the man she loved had prepared such an Eden as this for her, how would she have repaid him!

But, like the serpent in Eden, she saw there what escaped the eyes of the men, or had for them no particular significance—a hard-rubber hairpin, lying on the floor at one end of a settee.

The house was tenantless; but as plainly as if they were yet sitting there, the tortured girl could see her recreant bridegroom and her rival.

By what caress had this pin been dislodged? Had she been demanding repeated assurances of his loyalty? Had he sworn that he had never wandered, in truth?—that he had engaged himself to Lina in the pique of some lover's quarrel?

So she tortured herself with insane jealousy, telling herself again and again that just such a hairpin had lain on the floor of that frigid "best room" when the wind had torn Gay's hair down.

As has been said, the house was now tenantless; and while the men were debating the significance of this fact, and what was to be done next, Lina slipped away, found and mounted her horse without assistance, and stole off in the night.

Where was she going? She did not stop to consider. Anywhere away from that accursed spot!

Away! away! where no one who knew her should ever see her again! Oh, that the earth might open and swallow her up! She did not think of suicide, but of death, as a release, by some agency not her own.

Her brain seemed on fire. Everywhere she could see Gay Godwin's face peering at her with a triumphant smile.

Faster and faster she rode, only conscious that she was somewhere on the limitless prairie, with the purple dome of heaven arching over all, fleeing away, away, away, toward the far-off horizon, down behind which she hoped to sink out of the view and knowledge of those who had witnessed her humiliation; away from every sight and sound that would remind her of him!—where she might lie down and die in heart-broken solitude.

But she was not so to escape. She heard her name, then the thud of pursuing hoofs, and presently she was overtaken by one who had quite slipped out of her recollection.

It was Paul Pasteur.

"Lina," he asked, "where are you going? What are you about to do?"

"Going?" she repeated after him. "Oh, I don't know! Anywhere! anywhere! Only go back! Leave me to myself!"

"My poor darling! this will never do."

"I will never go back!—never! never!" she cried, with fierce impetuosity. "Do you suppose I could stand under that roof again—his roof?"

"Not—a thousand times no! But you need not. Let me take you away from them all. Oh, my dear one! you know that I love you—that I would have given my heart's blood to spare you this pain. Let me prove it to you every day of my life. Be my wife! Give me what he has never valued—has never been worthy of."

He was close beside her. His arms were extended, almost encircling her, yet waiting her leave to touch her. Heart-hunger was in his tones.

She had seemed utterly alone, away here among strangers, and with only memories in that Eastern home where she had seen her mother die, to lie at peace at last beside the father she had never known.

Paul bound her to those memories; Paul was true where the most trusted had failed her.

With a sudden impulse, she put out her hands, and rested them on his shoulders.

"Oh, you have been kind to me!" she cried.

But in an instant he had her in his arms.

"My darling! my darling! my darling!" he cried, in a burst of wild passion. "At last! at last! You shall never regret this moment! It will never fade from my memory!"

"You will take me away from here, where I shall never see or be seen by any of them again?"

"To the ends of the earth! To Europe!"

"If I could! if I could!"

"You can!—you shall! My darling! we will be married and away before any of them can overtake you. Once in the new world with which I will surround you, you will forget this hideous nightmare."

"Oh, if I was only sure!" cried the distracted

girl, throwing up her hands, and clasping her swimming head. "I have not seen him. It may be all some dreadful mistake!"

And at the thought of this possibility, she shrunk from Paul's embrace.

"You wish to see him—to see them together?" cried her lover, as if, driven to desperation, he now threw every restraining consideration to the winds; adding, as if by way of exculpation:

"You force it upon me!"

"Show them to me!—let me see him—him and her!—with my own eyes—oh, let me make sure!—and I am yours!"

She gave him her hands as a pledge.

He covered them with kisses, crying:

"You shall see them! I believe I can find them. I did not expect to find them at this house. They never met here, to my knowledge. But there! there! where I tracked him, and saw her open the door to receive him and upbraid him for keeping her so long in suspense—"

"Enough! enough!" burst forth the jealousy-maddened girl. "Let me see him! Let me see that all do not despise me!"

This unwitting confession was not very flattering to the lover, but he was bound to get her at any price. He flattered himself that, once his beyond escape, he could win her.

Riding blindly, Lina had unconsciously left the direction chosen to her horse, and he had taken the back track.

Though the next scene in the drama of treachery called him in another direction, Paul was wise enough not to leave the trail till they reached a stony waste where a line of scraggy buttes cropped up out of the prairie. Here he changed the course, riding rapidly to the northward.

A late moon rose, but they still kept on, now being in a fairly wooded country, rounded into hills, so that, when Lina looked back over their trail, she could see no great distance.

But Paul did not share her apprehension. He argued that, when it was discovered that she had slipped away, it would be taken for granted that she had returned to the only spot she could call home. This would be confirmed by the fact that she really had taken the back track.

With the start he would obtain by Mr. Reardon's return to the ranch before discovering that Lina was not there before him, Paul had no fears of being overtaken before he had made her his wife beyond question.

And so much of his expectations were realized. Mr. Reardon was thus led astray.

On the discovery of Lina's disappearance, he instantly abandoned further search for his son, and set out to overtake the distracted girl who had grown so near to his heart, and whom he believed to have been so bitterly wronged by his misguided boy.

When he reached his home, to ask for her of one who in turn sought her at his hands, his grieving wife was inconsolable.

"She is dead! dead! dead!" she moaned. "We have killed her among us."

So she took upon herself a share in her boy's supposed guilt.

Meanwhile, just while the gray of the morning was struggling with the broad moonlight, Paul and Lina were suddenly brought to a stand by a—to Lina—unexpected challenge.

From behind a thicket Gay Godwin stepped directly in their path.

"Hold on!" she commanded, bringing a rifle which she carried to her shoulder. "You can't go no further in this direction."

CHAPTER XIV.

SEEING IS BELIEVING.

AT sight of Gay Godwin, Lina felt as if she should swoon and fall from her saddle. Here was confirmation of what until now she had never quite received as true.

But then came a surge of furious scorn that set every muscle tense again.

"What fiend has guided you hyar?" demanded Gay—"you an' that thar dangler o' yours?"

And she glanced at Paul with seathing contempt—so bitter indeed that he felt it was not altogether simulated!

But suddenly she burst into a derisive laugh.

"You've got a hard cheek, you have—runnin' after a man that's used you the way you've been used. What do you want hyar, anyway? Why don't you git out?"

"I'm after proof," answered Lina—"proof that—"

"Waal, why don't you speak up?" jeered Gay.

But what could poor Lina say?

Presently she blurted out:—

"Are you married?"

"That's none o' your business!" retorted Lina, quite as promptly, and with undaunted firmness.

"My good woman," here interposed Paul.

But Gay interrupted him contemptuously.

"Your good woman! Waal, that's good, that is! Ha! ha! ha! I like that, I do! Your good woman!"

With difficulty preserving his countenance, Paul began again.

"Whatever you may think of me—"

But here he was cut off as short as before.

"That ain't enough to be worth speakin' about! But say, mister!—I owe you somethin',—I believe my soul I do! An' I'd like to owe you a mite more. Suppose you take that mincin' piece out o' this country? She ain't wanted around hyar, you bet yer life! She'll find, before she's much older—or I lose my guess!—that Reardon's ranch is a heap more oncomfortable than Sat Godwin's. They're goin' to have a house-warmin' over thar before long. She won't find herself welcome—I kin tell her that!"

Her eyes snapped viciously, as she turned them again upon Lina. Her tone was that of one conscious of the power to command.

Paul made a third essay.

"It may simplify matters a great deal, if you will listen to me," he said. "We are here, not intending to interfere with you—"

"Much good would it do you!" interrupted Gay, jeeringly. "You can't interfere with me, Mister Man—neither you nor—nor—her!"

And she drew up her head with a triumph that made Lina sick at heart, and at the same time almost insane with rage.

"Not to interfere with you," insisted Paul, "but only to learn the truth."

"What truth?" demanded Gay.

"We want to be sure that James Reardon is really with you. We want to see him with our own eyes."

"Waal, you can't see him! Who said that Jim Reardon was with me?"

The first sentence was shot out defiantly. The second was added craftily, as if from an afterthought.

"Isn't he?" asked Paul.

"That's none o' your business, whether he is or not."

"But can't you see that you will be serving yourself in serving us? You want to be rid of us—"

"You bet yer sweet life! You never spoke a truer word! I'd like to put a bullet-hole through you, apiece; an' maybe I'll do it yet, if you don't quit crowdin' me!"

"You can be rid of us much more cheaply than that. Give us proof of your marriage, and we will trouble you no longer."

For the first time Gay's resolution seemed to be shaken. She hesitated, looking from one to the other.

"You'll stand to that, stranger?" she suddenly burst forth, as if taking a quick resolve.

"We will," answered Pasteur.

"Look a-hyar!" cried Gay, with a look of intense curiosity. "Be you sweet on her, mister?"

"That's not your affair!" replied Paul, with such a show of indignation as he could command.

"Because ef you be," persisted Gay, "you might take her out o' the country at once, an' we'd be shut of her out of hand."

"It is enough for you to be assured that Miss Merrill has no disposition to contend with you for—"

"You let her speak fur herself," interrupted Gay, sharply.

And turning to Lina, she demanded:

"Will you clear out, if I prove to you that I am married, an' that your show has gone up the spout?"

"Prove it to me," answered Lina, in a choking voice, "and neither you nor any one else will ever see me after you lose sight of me here."

"You'll quit the country?"

"Yes."

"Right away, I mean."

"Before the sun is clear of the horizon, yonder, I will have set out."

"Without tryin' to git speech with—with—I ain't goin' to give you a chance to poison my—anybody's mind against me. I've got the rope-end of you, and I mean to keep it!"

"You need have no fears," answered Lina, her nostrils dilating with cold scorn.

With a quick movement, Gay thrust her hand into the bosom of her dress, whence she drew forth a closely-folded paper, while her face was suddenly suffused with a vivid blush.

"I don't 'low to let you git your hands on it," she said. "I reckon you'd like the chance to

tear it up. But it's already light enough fur you to see it from whar you set. An' I reckon you know how to read well enough so's you won't want no more points than this."

She unfolded the paper and held it outstretched between her hands, with the face presented to Lina's view.

It was unmistakably a marriage certificate. The printed form showed that. But Lina's eyes blurred so, as she stared at it, that she could not make out the names filled in in script.

However, had she been able to do so, it would have appeared all regular.

It certified to the marriage of Gabriella Godwin to James Reardon, and was dated the day before.

"You see," cried Gay, with a hysterical blending of a sob and a jeer, "he thought more of me, after all. When it came to the pinch, he caved, an' I took him while he was in the humor. Now, if I'm clean shut o' you, thar won't be nothin' to wean him away from me ag'in."

All this was said so naturally, and was so in keeping with what Lina believed would be her own feelings under similar circumstances, that she was completely taken in.

It was only with a feeling of desperate resistance that she insisted:

"Let me see him with my own eyes. If he is with you—"

"Of course he is with me!"

"Then let me see him."

"Never! I'll kill you, if that'll suit you."

And the desperate girl threw her weapon forward, as if to carry out her threat.

"If he is here, why don't he show himself?" cried Lina. "You are lying to me! He isn't here, and never has been! That paper is a lie. He was never married to you!"

For an instant Gay recoiled, aghast. In her coffin she could never look more ghastly pale than she turned then. All had failed! The plot was suspected, and would soon be known as clear as daylight!

"I'll kill her! I'll kill her!" she whispered to herself.

But she had quite misinterpreted Lina's hysterical cry. It was only an attempt to force access to the man who was hiding from her, as she fully believed. It was an obstinate determination to carry her point—to look upon him with one withering glance, and then throw herself into Paul Pasteur's arms before his eyes.

How she would rain kisses upon Paul's lips! Of himself he could never secure such prizes.

"Jim Reardon!" she cried, raising her voice—"you coward! come out here!"

"Hush! hush! I'll strangle you!" cried Gay, leaping toward her.

Something in her voice or manner arrested Lina's attention; and she paused, looking at her in astonishment.

She had spoken as one might check some undue noise in a sick room.

"All this is folly!" interposed Paul, with an assumption of impatience. "If you are fast married, as this certificate shows, what harm can come of gratifying Miss Merrill? She cannot annul the marriage, and such an interview is not likely to make either very attractive in the eyes of the other."

Once more Gay stood undecided.

"You can't see him," she said, doggedly. Then, with a look of pain, she added: "He ain't feelin' well."

It was the expression of voice and manner that made Lina start with apprehension.

"Not well?" she cried, sharply. "What has happened?"

"He's had a tumble from his horse—that's all!"

This was spoken with an undercurrent of foreboding and fierce revolt against fate.

"Ah!" breathed Lina, involuntarily lifting her hand to her bosom.

A gray pallor suddenly overspreading her face indicated the spasm of pain that shot to her heart. She loved him still!

"You needn't take on! It ain't nothin' to you!" cried Gay, with quick jealousy.

"Is he so that he couldn't come here if he would?" asked Lina, with a humility she would not have believed possible.

"I reckon he's asleep. I left him so when I see you a-comin'."

"I'd like to know how you come to find this place," she added, as if the thought had just occurred to her. "I blinded the trail the best I knowed how, an' I lowed as nobody didn't know about this hyar."

"I have tracked him here before," answered Paul, quickly.

"You hev, eh?" said Gay, turning a baleful

glance upon him. "I'd 'a' liked to 'a' ketched you up to it!"

This recurrence to Jim's treachery stifled the pity that was struggling in Lina's breast.

"If he is asleep," she said, "it won't hurt to let me see him. I'll not wake him. I only want proof that can never be glossed over, that he is really with you."

"You'll swear to that—that you won't do nothin' to wake him up, ef I let you see him through the winder?" cried Gay, eagerly, as if this were a cheap way to get rid of her unwelcome visitor.

"I swear it!" replied Lina, placing her hand on her heart.

"An' you'll cl'ar out o' hyar, an' out o' the country?"

"I'll leave you to yourself, and to such satisfaction as you can get out of his perfidy, forever!"

"Done! done!" cried Gay. "You stay whar you be a minute, an' ef he's asleep you shall see him to your heart's content."

As she turned to investigate, she flung a menace over her shoulder.

"Ef you throw off on me, I'll make you wish't you'd never been born!"

She was gone but a moment.

"Come," she said, on her reappearance. "You leave your hosses hyar, an' you step light, you do. Remember, you're not to speak a word from this out."

Lina and Paul dismounted and followed their suspicious guide.

A few rods beyond they came in sight of a structure common in the West, called a dug-out. It was only the front of a house, with a roof sloping on either side to the earthen bank in which it's one room was excavated.

It had one door and one window, both of which stood open. The latter was supplied with a tight board shutter, with which it could be barred against the weather.

The front was toward the east, and the light of the brightening dawn streamed in, clearly illuminating every part of the one room.

On tip-toe Gay preceded her guests to the door, stopping just across the threshold.

"That's fur enough," she whispered, arresting Lina just without the doorway.

White to the lips, Lina stared in through the doorway. There, on a bunk bed, covered with blankets, with the full light of the glowing east streaming in upon his pale face, lay her lover, sleeping apparently the labored sleep of the exhaustion which follows pain or a severe shock.

There was a thin line between his parted eyelids. He breathed heavily.

The girl pressed her hands upon her throbbing heart as she gazed.

Beautiful, with the beauty that wins woman's love, the beauty of commanding strength and courage, he lay.

What mattered it that he had betrayed her—that he had degraded himself to the level of this half-savage creature who stood guard over him with murder in her heart and that hideous instrument of death in her hand?

Tears welled into the eyes of the girl. Then a wild despair seized her, and turning blindly, she extended her hands to Paul, and murmured:

"Take me away! oh, take me away!"

He half-carried her back to her horse, lifted her into the saddle, and then turned their horses' heads away from the spot which must ever more be to her accursed.

How could he command the expression of his face? His knitted brows, his humid eyes, expressed such pain as a true-hearted lover might feel in such piteous circumstances. Within, a chuckling devil of triumph was madly rioting!

Scarcely able to restrain the hysterical shrieks of exultation that rose into her throat, Gay followed them, as they went with their backs to the light, their faces set toward the shadowed West.

So delightful were the sensations she experienced, that she kept on till she stood on a pinnacle of rock which commanded a plain of some extent which they had to cross.

"Go on! go on!" she cried, under her breath. "I hope you may never stop this side of the Golden Gate!"

She laughed at the play upon the name, which made it mean either the port which was the gateway to the Pacific or the gate of heaven.

When they had passed out of sight, she was suddenly seized with a wild sense of secure possession at last, and on winged feet she sped back to the dug-out, to fling her arms about her prize and pour out her swelling heart in wild, incoherent protestations and adjurations.

Whatever her faults, she loved him well.

Approaching the dug-out from the side, she

paused just without the door, with clasped hands and hungry eyes peering within.

It was as if she would prolong the delight of clasping him in her arms by reveling in the anticipation.

But, see! She starts! A stare of amazement distends her eyes and leaves her mouth agape. Then, with the cry of a tigress robbed of her young, she leaps through the doorway and disappears from view.

Meanwhile Paul Pasteur pressed the horses to their speed. Everything had been carefully planned for just such a situation as this. It had come about a little differently from what he had expected, but the result was the same that he had hoped to bring about.

Directly from the dug-out where Jim Reardon was held on exhibition to conclusively convince his bride that he had forsaken her for another, Paul rode to a town of sufficient importance to boast a resident minister.

Interrupted at his breakfast, the divine was ready enough to let his coffee get cold while he read the marriage service, but he looked grave at the urgency of the groom and the evident distraction of the bride expectant.

He would have taken Lina apart, and questioned her as to whether she was taking so grave a step of her own free will, and with sufficient deliberation; but she cut him short.

"I am old enough to know what I want," she said, "and no one living has any right to question my acts. Only be as quick about it as you can. Let us go! The soil of this accursed spot burns the soles of my feet!"

CHAPTER XV.

DAT BOY CLEM.

WHILE others allowed themselves to be distracted by other thoughts, Little Shoo-fly had but one. He never lost sight of his young mistress.

At the same time he managed to keep a pretty sharp lookout on Mr. Paul Pasteur's movements. But this last was not difficult, since Paul kept so close to Lina.

When, maddened by the evidence of Gay's presence in the house which her lover had secretly built, Lina sought to escape all who were in any way connected with the man who, she believed, had betrayed her, Clem saw her slip away, and promptly followed her.

Luckily, he was so wary of being detected, having recently learned a lesson from his capture by Jack Godwin, that he gave Paul Pasteur an opportunity to get ahead of him.

The darkness while they were on the open plain, and the timber and broken ground through which their way lay after the moon rose, enabled him to keep track of the fugitives without laying himself open to discovery.

He followed them to their meeting with Gay Godwin, and at once realized that he had found Mars' Jim at last, even before he got sight of him.

The plotters and their heart-broken victim were scarcely out of sight of the dug-out, when Little Shoo-fly slipped into it, and discovered his beloved master, with a low cry of delight.

Appearances were nothing to Clem. He had made up his mind that the two who were dearest to him were designed for each other, and he scoffed at the idea that either could really be untrue to that destiny.

Without understanding it at all, he believed that Pasteur and Gay were in collusion for their mutual benefit.

It was only necessary to get Mars' Jim from under their baleful influence, and impress upon him that Missy Lina was breaking her heart for him, to bring him back to his allegiance.

Once aroused, Clem had not the shadow of a doubt that he would sweep aside the machinations of his enemies like a giant bound gossamer.

Without the slightest hesitation or ceremony, he seized the sleeper and shook him violently, making the discovery that he lay fully dressed under the blankets.

"Mars' Jim! Mars' Jim! rout out o' dish-yeah! It's me, Clem! What you do'n byeah, sleepin', while Missy Lina done cry her eyes out 'long o' you not comin' to de weddin'?"

But it was soon evident that this was no ordinary sleep.

Little Shoo-fly left off his appeal and his efforts to shake his master into wakefulness, and stared at him apprehensively.

"Dey's conjured him, or dey's gib him a sleep-in' potion," declared Little Shoo-fly, in cold dread. "An' Missy Lina she's gone off to marry dat 'ah rapsallion, 'lowin' as Miss Gay hab got Mars' Jim away from her, an' he willin'!"

What was to be done? It would be impossi-

ble to call Lina back. Even if she could be induced to come, she would be helplessly in the power of her enemies.

But what was to be done must be done at once.

In prowling about, Little Shoo-fly had discovered Jim's horse, tethered at a little distance from the dug-out. He supposed that Gay's was somewhere about, and resolved to get possession of it, and so leave her afoot, unable to make effective pursuit, if he got the opportunity.

But the first thing was to secure Jim himself.

"It's lucky he rode de ole Ginerall yistiddy!" said Clem to himself, recalling a trick of the horse which would materially aid him in his purpose, if indeed it would not otherwise have been quite impossible.

Slipping the animal's tether, he led him bare-back to the hut. The doorway was low, but Clem measured the distance clear above the horse's back, as he passed under it, with an exclamation of satisfaction.

"Dat'll do! We'll skin froo dab, sure's ye live.

Leading the horse to the side of the bunk, he induced him to lie down.

Then, with no little expenditure of effort, he dragged Jim from the bunk out upon the horse's back, so that he lay along the animal's spine, with his arms and legs hanging down on either side.

The next step was to get the horse to rise without allowing the man to slip off.

This accomplished, Clem would have thrown his arms about the beast's neck, to give him a hug of gratitude, but that he was pressed for time.

Jim's own lariat, coiled on his saddle-bow, where it lay in the corner, was just what was required with which to bind him securely in place.

Clem had the good sense not to be diverted from effective work by the desire to spare his master the pain of even severe laceration. What were a few flesh-wounds compared with the loss of the lady of his love? Mazeppa's tormentor could not have bound him more securely in the same length of time.

Then out through the doorway—

Alas! the horse lowered his head, but was not intelligent enough to drop his body when he found that the load on his back struck against the top of the door.

Only Clem's watchfulness saved Jim from severe injury.

But, having stopped the horse, and so saved his master, what was to be done? He had miscalculated the space. It was impossible to get through.

Never before had Little Shoo-fly felt his boyhood so oppressive, though it is probable that there never was a boy more impatient of the slowness of natural growth.

But now he conceived an idea, which, however, involved some risk.

"I'll git him down," he finally concluded. "Den ef I hab to take him off, dat won't be my fault."

He got the horse as far through the doorway as he could, without crushing the unconscious man. Then, going at his head, he made several efforts to induce him to lie down so as to settle as far outside as possible. At last he succeeded to his satisfaction.

Then, getting his fore-feet out in front of him, the boy measured the distances with his eye.

Once more going to his head, and holding the bridle on either side, he murmured:

"De good Lawd help him now! An' ef ye don't push him forrard jes' a teeny-weeny mite, don't push him back none!"

With this invocation, he bade the horse arise. The animal lurched forward as he rose, making a enough difference in his lying down and spring up to clear the doorway.

"Dat's a sign dat we're gwine to scrape froo dis, sure!" ejaculated Little Shoo-fly.

Gay, having no further immediate use for it, had left her rifle standing against the doorpost.

Deeming this a dangerous enemy to leave in his rear, with a desperate woman to sight along its polished barrel, Clem took it with him.

Then into the saddle and away, as Tam O'Shanter fled the witches' sabbath!

So Gay rushed into the deserted dug-out, and in the first madness of her despair fairly tore the blankets off of the bunk, as if she must find him there somewhere, though of course reason told her he was gone.

She tore round and round the room, even beating the walls, and crying out his name in piteous appeal.

This was while she believed that he had roused of his own accord, and left her.

But the marks of the horse struggling to his feet just before the door gave her thoughts a different turn.

There was no difficulty in following the trail Little Shoo-fly had left. He had taken no pains to blind it. He depended on speed altogether.

The girl ran for her own horse, and set out in pursuit.

Clem had made a *detour*, flanking the position from which she had watched Paul Pasteur and his victim, and then struck upon the trail of the desperate plotter.

Goaded her horse like a fiend, Gay gained upon him, till she sighted him across a stretch of prairie. Then, when she saw how she had been robbed, and who had done it, her rage knew no bounds.

Shrieking after him, she lashed her horse faster and faster. Clem in turn scored his horses with a lariat end till Mars' Jim if he had been conscious, must have cried for mercy.

It was a wild race, in which the witch steadily gained. Little Shoo-fly saw it with despair.

What could be done. If it had been a man, Clem would not have paltered long. But a woman? Clem was instinctively gallant enough to make an almost incalculable difference.

But he would not sacrifice Mars' Jim even to a woman.

"I'll stick 'er out jes' as long as I kin," he promised himself. "Den ef she keeps gainin' on me, an' won't be put off nohow, I'll have to let her hab one, wid 'Scuse me, Miss!'"

It was no use. She kept closing the gap, her white, determined face showing that she would show no mercy, if she overtook the robber who had tried to steal the very core of her heart.

At last Little Shoo-fly saw that he must act at once, or accept a personal encounter the issue of which was more than doubtful.

Instantly pulling up, he tied the horses' heads close together, and threw a loop around the fore-leg of one, so hopping them, that they might not make off with their helpless burden, and leave him afoot.

This was done so swiftly and deftly as to resemble movements in military discipline. Then he threw himself upon his face, resting his rifle between the horns of the skull, and training its muzzle on the pursuer who was bearing down upon him like the wind.

Utterly heedless of this menace, the infuriated girl drew her revolver, and kept straight on.

"Look out, dah!" shouted Clem. "I'll drap ye, shore!"

She never uttered a sound, nor let her burning eyes waver from the spot she had chosen for the entrance of her bullet.

There was a little puff of white smoke, a whip-like crack which found no echoes to prolong it, and with a mighty bound into the air, her horse went to grass, rolling end over end with the impetus of his motion.

The girl was thrown, like a fluttering shuttlecock, far over his head.

Little Shoo-fly sprang to his feet, staring in anxious dismay at the results of his shot. Was she killed? Such a fall might have broken her neck!

"I didn't want to hurt her," almost whimpered the young marksman, "dough she'd 'a' knocked de socks off'n me ef she got de chance."

He was soon relieved. The girl scrambled to her feet, and began to grope about for the weapon that had been knocked out of her hand.

This determined animosity relieved Little Shoo-fly of all self-reproach. With a derisive shout he leaped into the saddle, and fled again.

But Gay had found her revolver, and knowing that her last chance was slipping through her fingers, she opened fire at once, though the distance was still great for small-arms.

Now she raged, continuing the chase on foot, even after all hope was gone! Then she threw herself face-downward on the ground, shrieking in mad hysterics, and fairly tearing up the grass with hands and teeth.

Escaped from her fury, Little Shoo-fly did not relax his efforts. She would only have taken his life, at most. But on ahead was more yet to be lost or gained. Mars' Jim's and Missy Lina's life happiness yet hung in the balance.

He gained the town, and the first man he met, seeing his urgency, and his accompaniment, wheeled his horse and joined him, so as to give him audience without checking his speed.

Of him he demanded to know whether there was a minister in the place; and wondering at so remarkable a way of bearing a dying man, as he supposed, to priestly consolations, the horseman told him that there was, and undertook to guide him to the parsonage.

So striking a spectacle piqued curiosity on

every hand, and before he had gone the length of the place Clem had a very rabble at his back.

By the two horses standing before it, Clem recognized the minister's house even before it was pointed out to him. Would he be in time? Was he forever too late?

"Will you take this man to be your husband, to love honor, and obey—"

"Missy Lina! Missy Lina! don't ye do it! I's got him, I has! Hyeah's Mars' Jim! Dese hyeah rapscllions, dey done kotch him! What's dat boy Clem do'n all dis while? Hyah! hyah! bless de Lawd, I's fotch him to ye safe an' soun', an' ye ain't sole yerself to dat—"

"Hole on, Marse Paste'r! Dis yeah's a liner! I'se got ye, old man! Don' ye drawer dat 'ah popgun! I'd hate to sp'ile yer beauty, I would so!"

The minister stared in amazement and dismay. He had thought nothing of the noise of an approaching party of horsemen. Such might dash by his house at any moment in the day. But what was the meaning of this assault upon the wedding party? A runaway match, no doubt, with the friends of the bride arrived at an awkward juncture.

But a reaction had evidently set in with the bride—she who had been so urgent that the ceremony be expedited. She now fled her groom's side, staggering toward the intruder and crying:

"Oh, Clem! Clem! Clem!"

"Hyah! hyah! hyah!" shouted the delighted urchin. "Glory hallelujah! Bress de Lamb!"

But what of Paul Pasteur? He saw the eyes of men about whom there was no foolishness fixed upon him with growing suspicion. Through the window he saw a horse standing, with the bridle-rein thrown loosely over the stump of a sapling, which had been cut off high enough above the ground to form a hitching-post.

He had heard of Judge Lynch as he holds court in the West. He had once seen a man mobbed. He knew that a woman—especially if she be young and beautiful—was a sacred object in that wild country.

Suddenly he lost his nerve, and clearing the window at a bound, carrying out the sash with him, he sprung for the waiting horse, and coursed madly down the street, with the whole rout at his heels.

He escaped them, being better mounted than the best of his pursuers. But what fate was it that took him back over the track he had come! Not heeding this fact of direction, in his first mad rush to place distance in any direction between himself and those who were thirsting for his blood, he kept on until he came upon Gay Godwin, now insane with rage, if not really demented.

"You have failed!" she cried, reading despair in his face.

"Failed!" he repeated. "I wish I had never seen you, to be tempted to this accursed enterprise!"

She said not a word further, but leveling her revolver, shot him through the heart!

A few minutes later his pursuers, as they came in sight, saw her standing staring blankly down at the body of the man she had murdered in that blind burst of rage.

She looked at them stupidly as they approached, but their yell of reprobation when they caught sight of the body at her feet seemed to electrify her.

She started. Perhaps she realized what she had done, all in a flash of awful consciousness. At any rate, she suddenly raised her revolver to her head, and apparently without a second thought, fired one more shot.

How Mammy's face shone, and how her eyes glistened, as she almost smothered her promising offspring in her capacious bosom.

"Make free wishes, honey! Yo' shell hab ebery one on 'em, ef it takes half my kingdom!"

Little Shoo-fly thought a moment, and then with a broad grin on his phiz, which seemed to say, "I's got ye now!" declared his wishes.

"I don't want no mo' clo'es a-gittin'-in. Dat's one! I don't want no mo' dish-washin'. Dat's two! I don't want no mo' swipes wid dat 'ah broom! Dat's free! Hyah! hyah! hyah!"

"You's a mighty knowin' nig!" answered Mammy.

But she was so proud of him that she was disposed to be very indulgent; and if she didn't always make good her promise, especially with reference to the last wish, yet a hundred times a day, as she notes the happy faces of all about her, she chuckles softly to herself:

"Dat boy, Clem!"

THE END.

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